



A  
*M*ISTRESS  
TO REMEMBER

ELIZA LLOYD

# **A Mistress To Remember**

by

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## Chapter One

Baroness Katrina Klee, a Russian émigré, was one of those rare women men could not read. She was glacially reserved, aristocratically elegant, and Mark Turnbow, the Earl of Compton, thought one of the most stunning women to have graced London's ballrooms in his remembrance.

He had few interactions with her, but when he did, he always had a singular thought afterward.

*What would she be like?*

Across the room, she danced with another partner, whisked about the room on the arms of man who no doubt harbored the same lascivious thoughts as Mark did. Myriad sounds hummed around him like a swarm of bees: the light tinkling of glass, the murmur of whispered words and the occasional outburst of laughter, except he thought he could hear her above the drone of London chatter.

He stood not so far from her, and glanced away lest some tabby catch him staring. Because he was staring, compelled by her beauty and mysterious grace.

Events had happened recently to give him several moments of consideration regarding Lady Klee's suitability as a mistress, along with the determination to ask after her interest in such an arrangement. It sounded stiff and formal for such an illicit and secretive venture.

Hm. Baroness, Lady Klee. Klee was a Germanic name—perhaps the title was awarded under the Hanoverians. He could check their peerage in Debrett's, he supposed, or he could continue to think of her as the Baroness, regardless of etiquette, her Russian heritage, or what blade a Klee ancestor had to wield to earn the baronetcy.

The Baroness. It suited her exotic presence.

Mark had entered that phase of his life where he no longer allowed his heart to rule in such decisions, thus uncomplicating an association which might be enjoyable purely on its physical elements, if one could find a woman of similar sentiment.

Was Lady Klee that woman?

He'd convinced himself his heart would not be engaged; however, he was recovering from the most devastating event to have happened in his life. His wife, Susannah, had died a month ago, attempting to give birth to their first child—a son. A beautiful child, with a full head of dark hair. Mark blinked away the wrenching image and wiped away the unpleasant expression on his face, smiling tightly at the first

person to pass him.

Society would certainly frown upon him if they were aware of his determination to take a mistress so soon, except those widowers who knew what it was to be alone. Mourning would not be over for another eleven months and he had no intention of wallowing in his grief. He intended to keep those devastating emotions to himself, drinking in the quiet of the night when it was too unbearable. A distraction such as Lady Klee was exactly what he needed to obliterate that painful guilt which hounded him and hung over him like a cloud when he was not otherwise occupied.

A mistress could provide a much-needed balm, a diversion for his desolation. He'd had a year from hell. Perhaps deservedly, if he took into consideration the entirety of things gone wrong.

He had a lingering hesitation about taking a mistress, but he was single and in dire need of physical comfort. Certainly the kind of comfort sex provided, but he was not unaware that he missed the domesticity of a wife, a woman beside him in bed and in life. Companionship was not the same as love, he knew. Susannah had withdrawn from him well before she went into labor, though she had adamantly, intemperately professed that fickle and troublesome emotion. He was just a husband to her, an entrée into society—not a lover, not a friend, not a companion.

Thus leading back to his thoughts about Katrina Klee.

As the earl, he now had the funds to afford a private luxury such as a mistress. Though how that miraculous event occurred was a secret he shared only with his sister, Christina. She'd gone to Scotland months ago, carrying her own pain and the secret of an illegitimate child. At times, he felt kismet was punishing him for allowing Christina to sacrifice herself for the family. Somehow that catastrophe had righted itself and provided the few stepping stones to the Turnbow family's financial recovery and the shoring up of the Compton earldom.

Susannah's dowry, along with the benefits of a few shrewd investments that had actually paid a handsome return, things had improved. Mark wasn't about to say his luck had changed—that was more akin to something Father would have said as he gambled away the family fortune.

Katrina had whirled her way around the room and was once again within sight.

Aside from Katrina's appearance, his reasoning for singling out the Baroness had more to do with *her* situation. She'd also had a difficult year. Her husband had died about this time last year. She was out of mourning now, but there were persistent rumors she wished to return

to Russia, but was unable to at this time. He wondered if she was in a weak financial position.

The two other reasons were hunches more than anything. She was an Angerstein, a family of supposedly wealthy cits who'd earned their fortunes in London at the end of the last century. They were all gone now, but she had never stopped in her attempt to elevate the Klees to a higher social standing, the trials of the past year having put a damper on her social aspirations.

The last reason was sensitive and not something he could come out and ask. She had had a very close relationship with the Duke of Melrose. He had also passed away recently. His sudden demise, though he was eighty, might have left her without a parting financial gift. And perhaps she was searching for a replacement.

All reasons Mark could understand. All reasons to assume she was lonely and in need.

Just as he was.

Thus his conclusion that she would be perfect.

He did not feel the necessity of using a second to negotiate with Lady Klee, not that they had any mutual acquaintances. For the time being, he wished the matter to remain private. He was not in a position to parade an amour about town without ramifications or further encouraging gossip about the family. And as for his mourning, certain items of public etiquette were routinely relaxed for men, though he had been wearing a black cravat and armband.

Mark had asked her to dance earlier in the evening and she was just now being escorted from the floor by a young viscount from Leicester. The Baroness was lithe and graceful. She was not one of those buxomy, pampered women who enjoyed bonbons several times a day. On the mornings he rode at Hyde Park, he often saw her strolling with any number of other women, wives of *ton* cits and noble ladies who'd befriended her.

He cleared his throat and ran his fingers together, working his gloves into a better fit. He'd never officially taken a mistress before. Prior to his marriage, his dalliances were conveniently temporary and mutually pleasurable. A shag, nothing more.

He had to admit Lady Klee's desire to return to Russia was a benefit. He would remarry eventually, probably as soon as his mourning was over, but he would marry a noble this time, not just a woman who sought a title, as Susannah had.

"Baroness," he said, bowing before her while she dipped into a polite curtsy.

"Lord Compton."

When he set his hand to her waist and felt the warmth of her

body, he enjoyed the brief image of her naked in his arms. Her return touch was light and magnetic. Her neck arched in a fine curve as she looked up and away, expecting him to confidently lead. A delicate vein throbbed below her ear.

Yes, she would make a lovely mistress.

The seven-piece orchestra called to the dancers with a short overture and then moved into a lush rendition of "The Spanish Dance," a beloved country waltz. After a full circuit around the room, she said, "I was so sorry to hear of your loss. I remember how it felt when I lost my husband."

"One cannot expect forever."

"Yet we all hope." She smiled and caught his gaze for a brief moment before she glanced away again.

His fingers itched to move lower over her hip. Anticipation was nearly as potent as any aphrodisiac.

After another turn, he finally caught her exotic scent, like spices, elusive amongst the fog of rosewater and lavender in which the other women were drenched. Pressing his nose into the hollow of her neck would be a joy on those mornings he woke next to her.

"And you are recovering from the loss of your benefactor?" The subject was delicate—he was not the sort to ask a woman if she wished to shag him for money. Or jewels. Or whatever it was women desired. And she was a titled lady, which afforded respect, even if his mind traveled down a disrespectable path.

"Benefactor?" she quizzed with a wrinkled brow, and then nodded. "Oh, yes, Geral—His Grace," she amended. "I will miss him. He was a dear, kind man."

She did not reciprocate with a question of her own and the conversation stopped. His gaze searched her face. Porcelain skin and long eyelashes. A small, dark beauty mark near the corner of her left eye. Her hair wasn't the color of a Siberian winter but rather the honeyed gold of summer.

He often thought she should have blue eyes, but their color was an unusual shade of violet, made more vivid by the color of her rich gown.

There was something unique and sultry about her. Perhaps it was in her words and voice with only the remnant of a Russian accent, smoothed over by the years she had spent in London. Or maybe it was the way she glanced up at him, all demur yet somehow conveying sensuality.

Or maybe it was because she was unaware of her effect on him.

As the dance ended, he had no chance to direct the conversation to his request. While most women would flirt and tease or at the very

least make small talk, Lady Klee had been utterly proper. Reserved.

"Would you care to step on to the balcony and take some fresh air?"

She smiled. "Your offer would be most welcome."

She set her fingers to his arm as he led her through the crowded ballroom. "Quite a crush this evening."

"I have been overly warm since I arrived," she said.

"Would you care for refreshment instead?" He sounded like the veriest bore.

"Oh, perhaps later." They stepped through the double doors. The change in the air was immediate and welcome.

As he led her down the marble stairs, she said, "I was happy to hear of your sister's marriage. I felt as though I had a hand in it."

The circumstances of Christina's marriage involved more secrets than Mark cared to think about, let alone discuss. Heat suffused his neck at the idea some else knew. Mark tugged at his cravat, heating noticeably, alone with her in the dark.

"How so?" he asked, turning toward her.

"She and your other sisters had accepted an invitation to one of my balls last year and the marquess arrived, looking all wicked and determined. If I had to guess, I would say he attended only because of your sister. He had never come to one of my soirees before, you see."

They strolled along the shell-lined path.

"I didn't make the connection until they married," she finished.

"Then you should be complimented on your match-making skills. I believe she is happy with Lord Dane." A romantic notion to be sure, one Mark wouldn't mind spread around *ton*, if it deflected or hid the facts. The sordid truth was so much more base and scandalous.

"Baroness, I have something to ask you."

The shadows were enough to give privacy but not enough to allow one to be indiscreet.

"Of course," she said, glancing up at him again.

"Perhaps it is too soon. I know for my part the *ton* will frown on my... Well, I have come this far, the direct approach might be best."

She laughed lightly. "Goodness, you sound serious. I hope I will not disappoint you."

"No. It is just that I see our circumstances are similar, and I do feel a certain attraction for you."

She set her hand to her chest. She bit down on her lip, but the sensual glance she imparted nearly had him tongue-tied.

"Since the Duke of Melrose passed and you are no longer under his protection, I had thought to offer myself in that role. I do not know

the proper etiquette for such a matter, and of course I will provide those luxuries to which you are accustomed.”

He studied every reaction, hoping to see some acknowledgement that she understood his request before he actually had to say the words.

“It would be a temporary arrangement, until I remarry, but I would make it worth your while.”

“A temporary arrangement?” she asked. Her words were barely audible.

“For a year or so.”

Her gaze was averted. “Such a tempting offer,” she said.

“You wish to think about it. I understand.”

“Yes, there is much to think about. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Baroness, I would be honored if you would be my mistress.” He squeezed her hand. “We don’t have to be alone.”

Mark stared after as she hurried toward the house. She hadn’t said no. He was certain she would consider his request most seriously.

\* \* \* \* \*

Could she die now? Should she put on sackcloth? Dab her face with ashes? Good Lord, he wanted her to be his mistress.

Katrina Angerstein Klee pressed her hands to her face and took a deep breath. She felt the heat of embarrassment burn from her forehead to her tightly laced stomach. Did all of London think she was Geral’s mistress? She wanted to hide behind the velvet curtains in the quiet library where she’d taken refuge. Oh, she must leave! She couldn’t bear to have any one look at her with suspicious knowing.

And worse? That for two seconds, she had actually believed Mark Turnbow was about to offer for her. Their acquaintance was informal and superficial, but she was not without some awareness that he was dashing, titled and perhaps seeking a wife to bear an heir. She was aware of her own physical appeal, as well. Such arrangements were common among the aristocracy...but then she wasn’t a true aristocrat.

Her heart had tripped happily as if she were a first-year debutante.

Until she remembered the *on dit* recently passed around after his wife had died. Some nonsense about marrying for money and glad that he was now free of those bounds. Oh God, and did he really think she was some promiscuous, foreign parvenu?

She had never given a thought or hope that the earl, or any noble with such a title, held regard for her. He had certainly never shown any real attraction, as she would expect of a married man, but tonight,



she had sensed something different in the way he had approached her, as if he had noticed her for the first time.

How could she be so naïve?

And so desperately womanish. Why had marriage come to mind when they were nothing more than acquaintances? She thought she was stronger than that, unwilling to grasp an earl's coattails to elevate her standing.

Another wave of heat passed through her when she remembered the baron's coattails she *had* grasped.

She left the ball as soon as it was convenient, excusing herself by confessing to a raging headache. It was no lie.

She could not face him in the brightly lit confines of the ballroom. She hadn't even bothered to glance over her shoulder to see if he followed her from the manse. When she had married, it had taken many long months to overcome the stigma of being a foreigner and a cit—one who dared to enter their hallowed realms. And now she wanted nothing more than to disappear. She wanted nothing more than to return to her homeland where such missteps did not occur.

Only she couldn't.

Not as long as Samuel's brother was the guardian to her three sons and in control of the family funds.

How foolish and selfish of her to want to belong in English society. How insulting to be reminded that her stock, her ancestry, would always be considered inferior.

When she stepped from her carriage, she glanced up at the modest townhouse, grateful for this one piece of unentailed property. She was so appreciative Geral had encouraged her, through Samuel, to buy this home so that she would have some security. She had never imagined she would need it so soon.

Grandfather Angerstein had been one of Geral's oldest friends. Geral, entering the last stages of his life, had reached out to her. For comfort, maybe, or because he was lonely and knew her when she was a child. Nevertheless, she wanted to make him happy in his last days because he had stories she'd never heard and could speak a few words of Russian. Often, they had laughed together. They'd been friends but nothing more.

She should have chided Lord Compton; she should not have put herself in such a position. If Peter Klee, Samuel's brother, heard of this potential scandal, what would he do? How would he make her life even more unbearable?

Geral had attempted to assist, but even his influence had not been enough to thwart Peter's ambition to control the estate assets, such was the power of a guardian. There was no reason to think he would

enrich himself, but she couldn't help but think it. She hoped there was something left for Ivan when he turned twenty-one. She'd had one to many tiffs with Peter to think he'd look out for her interests.

This was not Geral's fault. An aged and ill duke was not as powerful as one in his prime, one willing to take on the world and win.

The night air had cooled after a refreshing rain. Katrina stood outside, nearly paralyzed in her tracks. What an odd, eye-opening night!

By slow bits, she collected her thoughts and then walked up the stairs. Tomorrow, she would face the dilemma with more clear-headedness. The Earl of Compton had just taken her off guard. She had allowed herself to believe in miracles.

She grabbed the handrail and started up the marble steps, allowing herself to smile then. Mark Turnbow!

The Earl of Compton had noticed her enough that he would consider her for a mistress. She was not immune to the fact a handsome gentleman had expressed interest. She shook her head. There was a compliment in there, she supposed.

Her lady's maid, Irma, helped her remove the layers of her evening gown along with the pins holding her hair in place. Neither of them was in a mood for small talk and after her lady's maid fetched a cup of warm milk, Katrina dismissed her. A small fire burned in the hearth, so she curled in one of the winged-back armchairs nearby.

A mistress?

She had never considered such a thing, not that she was considering it now. Alone in her room, though, she was free to imagine the possibilities in a way she had not for a very long time.

Samuel had not been adventurous in their bed. Katrina found she had been, at first, dutiful, and then curious. Then many long years of yearning for something more passionate. She did not think it was romance for which she pined. Samuel was as kind a man and husband as she could hope for, but there was no fire.

A silly thing to want, she thought. What woman would not have been happy with such a man?

Did it take a man such as Mark Turnbow to make her remember she wanted fire? Was it only with a lover that one could truly be free when it came to sexual pursuits?

Warming from the actual fire and her thoughts, she squirmed in her chair. Her cup of milk should be making her feel sleepy, not this deep sexual languor and longing.

Sometimes her desire for a man, any functioning man, was undeniably physical.

She did not want to attribute her slow arousal to anything Mark Turnbow had suggested. There were just times of the month when she was more *attuned* to her need. It had taken a few years before she understood she could assuage that need whenever she felt such urges.

In Italy, many years ago, she had found her first *diletto*—blown Venetian glass with a pearly vein running through the center of the shaft and then blossoming into a marble-sized burst. No one had to explain its use—the smooth, slightly curved shape of the glass and the flanged head were very distinctive. When the shopkeeper saw her interest, he invited her into the back room, where she'd had a very unusual conversation using hand gestures. She had left with four *diletto* of varying shapes and sizes. She'd never told Samuel, though she knew her lady's maid was wise to Katrina's secret.

No, she wasn't naïve—so why had Lord Compton's request shocked and embarrassed her as it had?

Katrina pushed from the chair, ensured her doors were locked and went to the armoire, searching for a certain *diletto*, her faithful companion since Samuel had died—or should she say, a *more* faithful companion. She reached for one but selected another, one with a bit more thickness and a long, smooth shaft, with a leather cuff at the end that made it easier to grip.

She washed it, enjoying the smooth, cool feel of the instrument against her palm and fingers. Already she felt the wetness between her legs. She strolled toward the Greek *flokati* rug in front of the fireplace. The brush of her rail tickled her legs. Her breasts swelled as she thought of brushing them with the tips of her fingers.

The oil she applied last. Not that her body wasn't wet enough, but she enjoyed the act of stimulation. Since Mark Turnbow was foremost in her mind tonight, could she not imagine his cock being held so gently in her hands?

Perhaps that was why she selected the thick, crested glass. She could imagine Lord Compton was generously proportioned, or if not, he at least knew what to do with what he had, along with the experience to satisfy a woman who wanted what he had inside her.

Katrina lay on the rug, relaxing for a moment. The rug was soft and smooth against her back. She wiggled a bit before lifting her rail. Her bare bottom came into pleasurable contact with the thick weave. She lifted her legs, bracing them against the brick fireplace ledge, now warmed from the long-burning embers.

She tried to envision Mark coming to her, standing over her just now and staring with lust in his gaze. He would be bold, she knew, with a touch of politeness just as he was tonight. He did not say he wanted to bed her, but that was what his words meant.

That he was bold enough to say he would bed her until he remarried put a clear point on what her position would be—sexual relief until he didn't need her anymore. He had never considered her as a candidate for marriage.

And why should he? He was in mourning.

There was the embarrassment again. It was her pride that had been dented tonight. She was enough of a woman to bed but not to wed.

The fire had heated her inner thighs. Rather than dwell on what wasn't, she slowly inserted the warmed phallus. She arched against the tight pressure, allowing it to slide outward again. There was no rush. She had always enjoyed slow pleasure. Samuel had always been in a manly hurry.

There were other things she would have liked. She would have liked to be completely naked, instead of him lifting her nightclothes. She would have liked more touching and intimacy—she wasn't always wet when he pushed into her. She would have liked to be more of a participant, doing those things that interested her, pleased her and tempted her.

She would have liked to fall asleep with him in bed beside her, kissing her as she closed her eyes in peaceful slumber.

And there when she woke in the morning.

A mistress would have no such freedom. Her duty would be to pleasure her lover. She had no doubt she could be inventive and interesting. Or that he would be demanding and indefatigable.

She would hate it if, and when, her lover leapt from their bed in search of his next wife.

She would hate it when Mark Turnbow married another, leaving her behind and alone again. Maybe that was the biggest argument against such a decision. Would this taint her reputation to the point she would never find a suitable man to marry?

At least aloneness didn't mean lack of sexual pleasure. It was the next best thing to a man.

The *diletto* slid easily, deeply into her again. She began a slow even thrusting, lifting her hips, surging and then pushing. Her breasts tingled. She used her free hand and cupped one, tweaking the nipple between her thumb and finger. Sweet, delicious pleasure spread downward.

Rolling to her knees while holding the leather-handled phallus in place, she relaxed on to her haunches. She propped the shaft on the floor and sank fully on to it.

Mark Turnbow was finely made. His shoulders were wide, his stomach and waist slightly lean. She would straddle him and take him

deep, eliciting his groans of pleasure.

She twisted her arms, allowing the rail to fall lightly downward. The thin batiste shift she wore to bed followed.

She was naked, the wood fire burning at her back. Between her legs, intense throbbing.

She cupped her breasts, letting her imagination supply the details —his hands were large and strong. They would knead her breasts softly but expertly. His mouth would suck her nipples until she stung, until the suction would be unbearable.

Then his mouth would trail kisses over her body. He would lick behind her ear, at the hollow of her neck, the dent in her stomach. Would he go lower? Between her legs? Into her body? She would let him do anything her wished with her.

Katrina rubbed the phallus faster, in short up-and-down movements. Her thighs burned with the effort. She pinched at her nipples, squeezing harder and harder. Finally, she allowed a moan to escape from her mouth. When the shaft was in deep, she freed one hand, searched between her legs for the throbbing nub and circled.

She focused her efforts between her legs, squeezing against the tight, thick *diletto*. The consuming pleasure blocked all thought except the need to go higher and stay as long as possible. She held her breath. She squeezed and held. And held.

It was glorious. A place that made her wish, “Let me stay. Don’t go. Longer. Wait. I need more. More.”

Oh, God, more.

The fall was bittersweet, leaving her thrashing against the hard contractions between her legs. Leaving her wanting something else.

A man.

She rolled to her side, keeping the phallus firmly wedged inside. She laid her head on her outstretched arm and felt the first prickle of tears and the clogging ache in her throat.

It was awful to be alone.

Alone in a country not her own. Alone except for three young sons whom she could never prevail upon or burden with her concerns.

Tears bubbled up and then washed over the bridge of her nose, spilling on to the rug.

The question wasn’t whether she should become Mark Turnbow’s mistress. The question was why hadn’t she taken a lover before now.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mama, you haven’t yet agreed to the hunting trip in Scotland. Uncle Peter wants to make plans,” Ivan said. He slathered fresh butter

on a thick piece of toasted bread.

"Every vegetable has its time," she replied, before sipping at her coffee.

"Mr. Altman says Russian proverbs are not easily translated into English. Now I understand what he means."

Katrina smiled. "Mr. Altman has never been to Russia. Otherwise he would agree with me."

"We would be careful, Mama," Ivan pled.

Ivan was all of fifteen now, looking every inch an Angerstein. All of them did. Samuel always boasted they came from good northern stock. They might have been Norseman from old with their blond hair and fair eyes, but their eyebrows were dark, which clearly defined them. The impression would be less noticeable if she could convince the oldest two, Ivan and Claud, to trim their hair more often. Sergei, her darling, always wanted to please her and wore his hair as a proper English lad.

"Fall is still months away. There is time to decide later."

"I don't want to go," Sergei, her youngest, pronounced. "Mr. Altman has promised we will start Homer in the fall."

"Then stay home. One of the Highlanders might mistake you for a selkie," Claud said, before returning his attention to a thick rasher of bacon.

"Please Mama. You've only to say yes. Uncle Peter will take care of everything else," Ivan implored.

Which was exactly what Katrina feared. He already had too much influence over their lives. When the talk of a hunting trip first came up, Peter Klee had informed her they would be going. Her approval was a secondary consideration, but Ivan, being the conscientious boy he was, continued to seek her consent.

The boys had never gone to a private school. Samuel had agreed they be taught the Russian language, its history and culture along with a standard British education. When Ivan was five, Samuel had engaged Mr. Altman, a Russian Jew—his heritage was similar to Katrina's, though he'd been born in England.

Samuel had set up a trust stipend to see them educated, money Peter could not lay a hand to, and therefore he did not dispute their education since no further funds would be depleted from the estate.

"Uncle Peter says you could return home to Russia while we are away. We know you want to go," Ivan said.

"Only if you are able to go with me. I will decide soon enough."

"I would like to meet the tsar. Mr. Altman says the Angersteins are related to the Romanovs," Sergei said.

“Tosh. Enough of that. The Angersteins were nothing more than silversmiths. Finish your plates now.” Yes, they *were* distantly related, so distantly, it was now only a good dinner story.

“We are late for our lessons,” Sergei reminded them, setting aside his linen napkin.

“What a fine boy you are, Sergei. I believe you are Mama’s favorite this morning.”

Claud reached for Sergei’s bacon. Ivan just smiled. “I promise we will be on our best behavior, when we go. And I will make sure Claud and Sergei behave.”

“I know. I have complete faith in you.” She had no such faith in their uncle.

After each of them kissed her cheek, they hurried off in the direction of Mr. Altman’s classroom. She devoted as little time as possible wondering what Peter Klee’s plans were other than to diminish her influence over her sons.

And other unthinkable things she refused to consider. If ever two brothers were more different...

Katrina’s thoughts turned to the more unnerving and interesting proposal of the Earl of Compton.

She could dither about it, but hadn’t she already decided to say yes? Imagining he was in the room with her last night while she pleased herself was proof enough she desired such a relationship, perhaps needed it. She hesitated to use the word *crave*—she was not a complete Philistine. Urges did not control her, but the thought of a playful, unthinking interlude had appeal.

While he was entering such a liaison for the availability of sexual intercourse, she had to decide what her needs were. She would not say yes just because he had singled her out, though she could admit that it stroked her pride a bit.

She must set aside romantic notions of marriage. Her immigrant status, her social circumstance, her age—all worked against her in trying to secure a new marriage partner. He’d made that clear.

So, yes, she wanted the sexual intimacy and wanted to explore the unknown pleasures such a relationship promised. She also needed funds of her own. Mostly she needed someone who might shield her and her family against Peter’s machinations, if necessary. Maybe the earl could be a champion too, as Geral had been.

The single Earl of Compton could provide everything except a shelter for her family. Entering this arrangement would be, by necessity, very private.

As long as she could keep Peter Klee from finding out. He might be the children’s guardian, but he was also a strict moral drudge who

seemed intent on controlling Katrina's decisions.

But maybe not this time.



## Chapter Two

She was going to say yes.

If she didn't, her rejection would be a rather severe blow to his ego. Something he'd actually recaptured after his marriage. Odd how money could make a man feel—

Yet, it wasn't really having money that built-up his pride; it was the lack of money that sapped his self-respect and confidence. The surprise inheritance of the family title didn't hurt either, though it came at the high price of his brother's death.

Mark had allowed Katrina a few days to decide; it was unseemly to pressure her, but his patience was thin. He had made arrangements by letting a home in a private, respectable district that included a convenient carriage house, fashionable furniture and, he was assured, a discreet staff.

If she said no, he would eventually find another mistress, though walking through the home's white and gold sitting room and the large expanse of the bedroom on the third floor, he could only imagine Lady Klee occupying this place.

She was choice, and he had honestly not given consideration to any other woman but her.

Rather than accost her at another ball, he went in search of a gift. A very specific gift.

Now that he had made the decision, he was anxious for consummation. In fact, he had thought of little besides the Baroness naked beneath him.

He rode his horse to his preferred jeweler and made inquiries as to where he might find a certain type of bracelet. By noon the following day, it was in his possession: an Angerstein-crafted silver and pearl band nearly two inches wide.

The gift was boxed, and he penned a note before it was delivered by messenger.

Would she meet him at eleven this evening?

Waiting until then would be torture.

By five, he was alone in his bedroom, reaching into his trousers to free his cock. He sat in a comfortable chair, stroking his manhood, dreaming of Lady Klee and all they might enjoy together. He spilled copious amounts of seed into a towel, and by six he was rock-hard and ready again. It had been months since he had been with his wife, sometime after she'd announced her delicate condition. And now many weeks later, the urge for Katrina could no longer be denied. He

was more than ready.

And his mind, finally, was clear of the dread and sadness that had weighed him down. Even the guilt he carried over his sister's shame and his part in it seemed diminished.

He'd sent an unmarked carriage for her. If it came back empty he would have his answer. A premature sting of disappointment bolted through him, imagining that possibility.

He bathed, dressed and arrived at the comfortable townhouse at ten, a footman greeting him. The candles were lit. In the bedroom, a small feast adorned a lavish table, including two bottles of wine. Mark grabbed one of the apples, prettily stacked in a pewter bowl, and took a bite before walking to the window overlooking the street. It was hell to wait.

He leaned against the window jamb and glanced back at the bed, turned down invitingly. Once she was naked in that bed, he wanted to enjoy the sight most thoroughly. His wife had rarely allowed him to see her unclothed.

He took a large bite of the apple; a satisfying *crunch* sounded.

Yes, once naked he would devour the sight of her.

After that, he'd bury his face between her legs and devour her properly. He licked his lips thinking about the possibilities from there. Another large bite of the apple was all he would get for now.

The carriage arrived early, the horses clopping along the cobblestone to herald her approach.

Parting the curtain, he uttered a small prayer. When the coachman jumped down and went to the carriage door, Mark allowed himself a breath to calm his sudden nerves.

He watched as she descended from the carriage. His cock leapt and he felt breathless with anticipation. Had he been this giddy since he was ten, waiting for his Christmastide orange and five pennies?

He hurried from the room and met her at the bottom of the stairs, just as she swept back the hood from her white velvet cape trimmed with fur. Gracefully, she removed her gloves and handed them to the footman. He then assisted with her outer garment.

"You came," Mark said.

"You persuaded me, Lord Compton." She curtsied, a brief dip that revealed daring cleavage.

The footman disappeared down the hallway. Mark could not take his gaze from her refined elegance and perfection—everything from the twisted curls in her hair down to the lay of pleated folds in her skirts.

"Should we discuss your requirements?" He waved a hand toward

the open sitting room door, but she remained in the foyer.

She handed over a piece of paper. "This is what I will require monthly."

He read the note without thought for etiquette. The number was reasonable and in the range for which he had planned.

"It is acceptable."

"This agreement is also with the understanding I will not be available during the day and only on certain nights. I was thinking Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Evenings only, and only when there is a ball since I will require a suitable reason to be away from the house. And I must be home well before dawn unless there is an appropriate and reasonable explanation for me to be late. I do wish to protect my reputation as much as possible."

"Of course."

He had hoped for more time, but if she was available for bedding four days a week, who was he to complain, considering his lack of sexual congress while married? And she had left open the door for other opportunities. Perhaps a weekend in the country?

"I find I am of an age where I must speak directly or forever be reminded that months and years can pass before I acknowledge something is missing," she said.

He nodded, intrigued by her statement and willing to explore the boundaries of her pleasure and comfort.

"And lastly, I can end our agreement at any time."

"I would expect no less. And while we are here, you may address me by my given name."

"Mark." Her lips turned upward then. Her half smile reminding him of her sensuality. "Shall we get down to our real business?"

"My heart's desire."

"A mistress's aim is to please, is it not?" She smiled cheekily, seemingly comfortable with him already. As he was with her.

"So far I am not disappointed. You look lovely tonight." She had donned a silvery-grey dress with white pelt about the sleeves and neck and pleats at her waist. He thought about Siberian winters and the need to stay warm.

"And the dress goes so well with my new bracelet." She displayed the rich bauble with some pride. "I was seriously considering your offer, but I must say, this significantly tipped the scales in your favor. I did not own any of the family jewelry, so I thank you."

He nodded, glad he had listened to his instinct to do something unusual to pique her interest.

What reserve she had, or that he thought she had, seemed to melt

beneath the heat of their pending adventure. What remained was not ice, but fire, which danced in her gaze and warmed him from chest to groin.

He reached for her, holding her delicate fingers in his palm. He brushed back her sleeve to see the bracelet fit perfectly around her delicate wrist. He ran his thumb through the silky fringe of the fur. When he lifted her hand, she watched with a certain anticipation he interpreted as enthusiasm. He pressed his lips to her dainty, slim fingers.

He slipped his other hand about her waist and pulled her close, closer than their waltz together. "If reality is even half as good as my expectation, I will be extremely pleased come the morrow."

He tilted his head and leaned in. She licked at her lips and closed her eyes. Mark inhaled the scent of her—chamomile or jasmine?—before they touched. Boyish excitement welled within. It was good to feel something other than hurt.

Exotic flavors assailed his tongue. Cinnamon, something else tangy and lemony along with sweet taste of honey. He groaned under the weight of his need.

She touched her tongue to his lips, swiping along his lower one. There was nothing tentative about her kiss. She was comfortably aggressive, taking what she wanted and giving him the new experience of enthusiastic willingness.

Katrina cupped his face. He answered, opening his mouth, matching her pace. She curled her tongue about his, while he thrust deep into her mouth. He felt and tasted her moan. His erection grew uncomfortable. Heat wrapped about them, a cocoon of sensual pleasure, reminding him of one of the greatest joys of a physical union—the intimacy of touch, naked skin to naked skin. How he had missed it. And wanted it so desperately again.

Money did not evoke such enthusiasm, he knew. There was more than just obligation in her caress. The Baroness was not the cool, reserved woman of the ballroom. She was fire, waiting to be stirred and stoked.

It would have been enough to give him a meal—she was handing him a feast.

When she pulled away, she traced her hands down his chest, still leaning into him. "If you don't mind, I would like the first time to be in a bed. The stairs do not appear terribly comfortable."

"But once we get to know each other?" He raised his brows.

"You will have to persuade me some more. But perhaps if the steps were carpeted."

Mark wanted to dip inside her sheath now and confirm all he had

suspected about Lady Klee. He reeled from her delicious taste, her natural seductive charms, her subtle humor and who knew what else.

He was going to find out.

If she offered to suck his cock tonight, he might offer her his fortune, modest as it currently was.

Once in the bedroom, she accepted a glass of chilled wine. She paced around the room, running her fingers over the silken bed covers, the polished wood and the mantel. "Will I have a key?"

"Anything you wish."

"Is this where you hide away all your mistresses?"

"No. I...I would prefer you thought of this as a new experience for me."

She squinted and swirled the wine in her glass. "The first time you've had a mistress?"

He nodded and watched as she thought about it. "Yes."

"That's a little difficult to believe," she said.

"I was married."

She set the wine aside and reached for the top button of her dress. He sipped at his drink while she slowly slipped the decorative beads from the security of their loops. The tight-waisted jacket was soon off. She tossed it across a chair.

"So was I."

Mark enjoyed the display, enjoying that he didn't have to lift a finger or encourage her in any way. Katrina might be reserved, but she understood the role of lover.

There would be no pleading, no ineffectual denials, just a direct approach to mutual pleasure.

Behind her back, she worked to remove her skirts. They fell to the floor in a billowy *whoosh*. She bent, displaying a lush expanse of breasts. The skirts were tossed to the chair as well. The hooks on her stays parted quickly, revealing a luminescent chemise, with thin straps at her shoulders.

"Allow me," Mark said, swallowing the last of his wine. At her waist, he lightly gripped the thin material and worked it up slowly. When the cloth was bunched, she lifted her arms and he eased it over her head.

He allowed his gaze to rake her body. She was fine, from the perfectly proportioned breasts, flowing down to a slim waist and curvy hips. The bracelet was an elegant addition to the faultlessness of her body.

He waited to see what she would do. Upon the bed, she presented him her shod foot, expecting him to assist. Shrugging, he worked to

remove his jacket before kneeling in front of her, placing his hand at her heel. There was no need to conceal what he was doing, so he stared at her naked beauty. She had leaned back, braced by her arms.

Aside from ogling her breasts, his gaze tracked down her stomach to the thatch of golden hair tufting on her mons. The spread of her legs was dangerously appealing. Getting one shoe off was more difficult than he had planned.

Her stockings were another matter. He placed both hands high on her thigh and loosened the tie, peeling back the sheer, sexy stocking. He set her bare foot against his thigh. She moved her toes over his crotch and pressed against his erection.

“Baroness, you are driving this carriage faster than it was meant to go.”

“We haven’t much time. I only wish to take advantage.”

He dispatched her other shoe and stocking with less introspection. “Don’t move,” he commanded. He pushed to his feet and began to shuck his clothing. Exposing his cock, falling on her, ravishing her would not have been difficult to imagine.

She watched him disrobe with as much interest, or so it seemed to him in his heightened state.

Evidently, her curiosity was piqued. She sat up, but instead of going for the obvious prize, she gripped his hand and caressed up his arm, exploring the contours of his muscles and pressing her lips against his skin in a very nonsexual way.

He’d never been with a woman so intent on examining him. Those in the past seemed to be more interested in cock, but even that enthusiasm was tempered. Perhaps her eagerness was due to the gift.

Reflection was really for a rainy afternoon and several drinks. He firmly put his thoughts aside and determined her reasons didn’t matter.

She was his as long as he paid her.

He placed one hand on her shoulder and nudged her backward. He knelt once again, but this time with clear purpose.

He kissed along her inner thigh. She arched and groaned at the simple contact. With practiced ease, she opened her legs for him, bracing one heel against the bed. The leg he kissed, she left hanging over the bed.

Her scent was stronger, but clean, womanly and slightly musky.

Mark wasn’t interested in delicate touch. He lowered his mouth and devoured her, as he had wanted. Quickly, he pushed his tongue into her.

She let out a throaty little scream, then panted as if she’d run up

the stairs, her chest heaving with want of air.

There were no sweet, gentle kisses. He mouthed and tongued every bit of the pearly wet flesh between her legs before he descended over the swollen button of her sex. He sucked the nub into his mouth and used the tip of his tongue, swirling over it.

From between her legs, he glanced up to see her poise had dissolved. With each exhalation, she groaned and mewled as if she would escape her own skin.

When, at last, he plunged two fingers deep into her sheath, she screamed while clenching her thighs tightly against his shoulders. When her breathing returned to normal and her thighs eased against his body, he asked, "Would you like another?"

"Oh God, yes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Katrina whimpered, stranded in another world, while she enjoyed the crashing waves, the thrilling currents that signaled the end of a richly deserved release, delivered by the sweet mouth and fingers of her new lover. Had she known, she would have had no second thoughts about being his mistress.

Would she like another? *Oh God, would I.*

She might give up her title for a month of such cataclysmic releases. She had no idea she could be brought to such quick arousal; certainly she had not been able to do it for herself. Currents still pulsed through her and washed her limp body upon the shores of Mark's bed, there to perish from her little death.

Should she have been shocked? No. Lovers gave their bodies to one another willingly.

She was shocked by the intensity of the feeling. The tension. The radiating warm. The searching.

And she wanted more.

"Kneel on the bed, away from the headboard," he said. He opened his hand. At his touch, strange frissons went through her fingers.

She would have frowned at his demand, but she was very curious to see where the earl would lead. Wasn't a mistress supposed to be compliant and willing? Or was that part of the game? Being submissive to a lover who wished to take charge? He did not seem like such a man, but then, he also believed she was Geral's mistress.

Mayhap she should have admitted to him that she had never taken a lover. Would his treatment be more gentlemanly if he knew? Would he mount her in the dark of night, thrust until he found relief and then leave her to her aching, unfulfilled dreams?

No. She preferred his true nature—nothing withheld—so she

might experience *her* true nature. Discovery of her assertive character was nothing less than an astonishment for her. A gate had been opened. Thoughts and desires she held closely to her heart had been given flight with his proposal.

She had hurried to his carriage, anxious and fevered; she'd stepped from it, chiding herself for being such a desperate fool. She had dressed with care and undressed with no thought for propriety. She'd been dutiful during her marriage. But for once, she'd cast duty aside in a rare fit of selfishness.

For now, she obeyed him, captivated by his commands and distracted by the delicious slide of moisture down her thighs. There were so many wonderful, intriguing improprieties.

She knelt, leaving her hands at her sides, nothing covered, not even a loose hair to hide her nakedness. Her breath spilled in hot gasps.

The strange thing was that Mark, a man she only knew as an acquaintance, was cast in the role of her lover. Strange tides, indeed.

He rolled onto the bed with her. She was allowing him intimacies she'd given to no other. Not even her husband had been so bold, or inventive enough, to touch her in such a way.

How would she look at Mark the next time she saw him, away from their love nest? Would she have to turn her face away, lest she betray their secret? Or with just a look, would she know he thought of bedding her? Would he plan a liaison in a hidden alcove? A library? Or take her back into a garden walk, exposing them to discovery?

Mark sprawled beside her, his head near her knee. "You know what to do," he said.

She didn't. When he reached back and around, clutching her bottom, nudging her, she lifted one leg over him. A surge of desire swept through her. He scooted a little, placing himself square between her legs, her knees bracketing his shoulders. His face was no longer visible.

She braced her hands against his stomach, then slid them slowly down to his hips. He jerked at her touch.

He cupped her, forcing her lower, until her womanly center was over his mouth. No amount of creativity on her part could have envisioned this. Throbbing began the moment he stroked his tongue across her soft folds.

His hands caressed up her back and lightly pressed her forward.

*How delicious!*

There was a purpose, she saw now. Her position placed her squarely over his cock if she but bent lower.

She enjoyed the pulsing between her legs and the lapping of his



tongue, as if each lick opened her to all the pleasures she had instinctively known existed. As she lowered herself over him, she bit back the smile that threatened to lead to laughter. Here in this room, with this man, she would finally find and fulfill those urges that had tickled her imagination.

She licked her lips and gobbled him up.

The first taste of him was an aphrodisiac. She showed no prudishness, as she felt none. Each lick of his tongue earned an equally enthusiastic swipe from hers. Was prostituting herself the great sexual equalizer? Did a man expect more from his mistress? Did he give more?

His tongue flicked over her throbbing nub. His fingers dug deep into the fleshy globes of her ass, forcing her closer to his face.

The tides of mutual pleasure changed as Mark became the aggressor and Katrina could only moan while offering token swipes. She undulated, then cried out before the sharp ascent of release claimed her.

His hands soothed over her thighs and bottom as the last of the contractions slowed, leaving her feeling well-used and content.

“Mmm,” she said, since words were unnecessary.

Weak, she lowered herself to his body, taking his long, hard cock deeply into her mouth. It was the closing scene of this act.

His erection was smooth and hot. She used her lips to encase him and then slid upward, pressing him firmly. At the tip of his cock, she swiped the flanged cap and touched her tongue through the slitted, weeping eye.

Mark’s hips thrust beneath her in slow undulations. His hands still soothed up and down her thighs. His short moans turned into longer growls. She tried to read his reactions and apply her limited, but blooming talents where he seemed to find them most enjoyable.

Beneath her fingertips, his testes grew firm. He took several short gasps. Katrina took his length, as much as she could. She sucked, tugging at the hard, long flesh.

The first splash of semen hit the back of her throat. She swallowed, surprised at her boldness. Again and yet again, he spilled, his hips jerking and filling her tongue with the tangy taste of him.

His great heaving sigh signaled his happy finish. She rolled to the bed beside him, his arm draped over her thighs.

Katrina was inordinately pleased. She’d made the right decision accepting his proposal. She’d always known there was more depth to the physical encounters between men and women, and how sweet the discovery.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t be paying you?” she asked absently, her

fingers rubbing the satiny material lining the edge of a pillow that had found its way to the end of the bed.

Mark laughed, reached for the bunched up coverlet and drew it partially over her. Neither of them seemed interested in moving, and Katrina was feeling languidly drowsy. She turned to her side, her face near his hip.

His chest still heaved, but he reclined with his eyes closed.

Seeing him naked and relaxed was a strange sensation, having last seen him at the ball. Many men looked smart in their trousers and perfectly cut jackets. She wondered how many of them looked as good naked as Mark Turnbow.

She ran her fingers across his ribs, and he flinched. "I'm ticklish."

She hummed an acknowledgement but laid her hand flat instead, unwilling to break contact with his warm, furred flesh. She liked men—this one was especially appealing to her, from the dark shadow on his jaw to the trail of hair on his lower belly.

She heard the sound of his sleep, soft snoring, so she pushed up, leaning on her hip and bracing herself with one hand. As gratifying as this new sexual experience was, she could not be lulled into a false sense of security.

This was temporary. Fleeting.

She repositioned herself beside him, tucking neatly under his arm where she could rest her head on his shoulder and lift her leg over his groin. However temporary, she would enjoy every moment of his warmth.

When she woke, still in the sleepy in-between place of reality and fantasy, she enjoyed Mark at her breast, applying gentle suction, while between her legs, his fingers worked in magical, slow circles. He nibbled and sucked, inducing a perfect, delightful arousal.

Her eyelids fluttered, trying to open but weighed down by the gentle lethargy of loving. He didn't seem to be in a hurry for her to do anything but let him do as he wished. She might have been riding a boat upon the gentle waves of the tide. The pleasure ebbed and flowed, she arched under his touch and moaned his name.

The first release rolled gently over her. She pushed her heels into the mattress and lifted her bottom from the bed as if suspended before she came crashing down. Again Mark applied his mouth and hands to her body. Katrina clasped his larger hand where it worked between her legs, wanting to feel the perfect way his fingers soothed her throbbing need. The breast he sucked was tender but he applied still more attention. He leaned over her then, taking her other breast deep in his mouth while his chest rubbed across the wet, overly sensitive tip he'd just abandoned.

She could die from such pleasure. And she did. Only to find Mark waiting for her when she finally opened her eyes.

He whispered, "Your carriage should be ready."

She groaned. "Oh, it can't be time, can it?"

"I'm afraid so. As you requested."

She breathed deep and closed her eyes. Fleeting, as the waves upon the shore. Strange, wonderful tides.

Even the night knew it could not linger. Dawn peeked on the horizon. Katrina hurried from the bed, dressed and departed to the safety of home and family. The next bed she crawled into, she would find heavenly sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark woke the next morning in a mood. A rasher of bacon and three eggs did not help. A second cup of black, bitter coffee, laden with cream and sugar, did not help. He couldn't put a point to it, so he sent a man for his horse, figuring a brisk ride through Hyde Park would liven his spirits.

He had never realized how he had relied on John, his older brother, for a quick game of cards or a gossipy conversation whenever *he* had needed it. His brother's disability had kept him in the house night and day—Mark had never acknowledged how he had taken it for granted that John would always be available.

He glanced around his room as his valet propped up one of Mark's boots. This home and family had had a great, tumbling fall over the past few years, albeit mostly private. They'd weathered a severe financial storm, endured John's death, celebrated the return of Christina's child's father to England and the subsequent marriage to her dark marquess.

Just when it seemed everything was righting itself, Susannah had died.

He was tired of treading upon this precipice of catastrophe.

Which led him back to waking alone and agitated.

Once Mark had settled upon Susannah as his wife, he had felt peace about the decision. He could see himself as a respectable husband and decent father and, in fact, felt a family would enable him to embark on this course of his life with dignity and contentment.

He had anticipated the joy of children. His sister Grace was amassing a brood and he was always entertained by them, but then they always had to go home at the end of a visit.

It had been thirty days ago this morning Susannah's lady's maid had hurried to the library to tell him his wife had died.

“The child?” was all he could mutter before she shook her head. And so ended his contentment. Three days’ worth of drink hadn’t made any of the surreal heartache dissipate.

He braced his hands against his knees and stood once his other boot was secured.

“What time shall I tell Cook to prepare lunch?” his valet asked.

“I think I will eat at the club today.”

Thoughts of Lady Klee wafted through his mind as if a dream were still haunting him. Her ethereal beauty along with her charming and enthusiastic abilities should have made him the happiest man in London.

But he still woke up alone. Maybe the preponderance of recent evidence suggested one must grab unto what happiness was available since it could be snatched away so quickly.

The air was brisk, the clouds hanging low with the occasional break that teased one into believing in the myth of sunshine. There were a few other riders, trotting and galloping along Rotten Row. He put his stallion through its paces and then headed toward the paths along the Serpentine, keeping the horse at a slow trot, which did not suit the animal as it pawed and bucked, wanting to run.

Honestly, he was not looking for Katrina, but when he spied her walking with a servant, he dismounted and waited for her approach. Yes, he knew she strolled in the park often, as did many a fine lady.

They had parted ways only six hours ago, but she was coifed and dressed to perfection. He’d never seen her cast in anything but a perfect setting. Her blue walking dress, her matching pelisse, her jaunty feathered cap—all of it spoke of a woman who knew what she wanted.

What mood he had experienced was replaced by a light-hearted humor. There was a certain guilty pleasure at seeing her—his mistress—when all of London was oblivious to their budding affair.

When she saw him, her brows winged, but she gave no hint of being displeased. Discretion did not include open rendezvous at the most populous park in London.

He removed his hat and bowed. “Lady Klee.”

“Lord Compton, you are about early.” She stopped and took her curtsy. The maidservant hung back several paces.

Mark turned, horse reins in hand, and walked with her. “You are well?” he asked. He tried not to dwell on the night passed, his face buried between her legs.

“Is it wise to be seen so open with your mistress?”

“Many men take their mistresses to balls with them and their

wives are in attendance.”

“That seems rather gauche. I’ve always thought such a liaison was meant to be private, for the personal pleasure of those two involved. And this would not be happening if you were married. At least not with me.”

He smiled.

“When you become betrothed, you will inform me, please,” she said. “I will not be the reason such a relationship becomes tarnished.”

“And you will hand me my *congédiement* when you become enamored of another?”

“It is only reasonable. However, I am not looking.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you wish to return to Russia.”

“If such a personal desire is widely known, you understand my concern about being so openly seen with you.”

“This is done all the time.”

“With casualness that astonishes me.”

He stopped and glanced at her. She fingered her parasol, causing it to turn slowly.

“But we all have our reasons,” she said without looking at him.

“What were yours?”

“Mine?” Her brows arched and she tilted her head slightly. “Is it not enough that I said yes—now I must share my reasons for doing so? Let us just assume it is for the oldest reason of all. Money.” She raised her brow at the suggestion. He smiled, knowing after last night that was probably the last reason for her decision.

They continued walking, he following her lead while his horse snorted in displeasure.

“Perhaps I would shock you,” she said, “if my real motivation were known.”

“I doubt it.”

“Perhaps not then. I’m just not used to such open discussion of something meant to be secret.” She confirmed her lady’s maid was a good distance back before she spoke again. “Are you such a curious man, Lord Compton?”

“At times, Baroness,” he said, wondering more about this woman now that he had seen her naked. “I have given you permission to use my name,” he reminded.

“Yes, but that was only because we were naked and about to be intimate.”

He laughed boisterously.

“I still do not know you well enough to be *familiar*.” She leaned toward him and whispered, “If I used your name, would not that

announce to the world we have a close association? You understand, I'm sure."

"I don't think I do, but continue on. I find myself growing interested."

"All right. I will shock you then. I will shock you by telling you my primary reason is pleasure." She smiled up at him, with the faintest hint of dimpling on her cheeks. "Does that not seem like a wonderful reason to engage a lover? The pursuit of pleasure, given freely, returned in multiples and with no expectations. I find it very liberating."

"So, I could have engaged you without cost?"

"Oh, my dear Lord Compton, nothing is free. You are paying me for my time, not what we do with that time."

"An unusual perspective," he remarked.

"If a man were to pay for the privilege of physical intimacy, would that not make it a chore for the woman? A duty?"

"You mean like marriage?"

She burst into laughter. "Oh, my lord, you are most astute. And most blind. If you think that is the only reason for marriage, you have been lied to and manifestly deprived."

"You place value in the institution?"

"A very high value. But I can understand why you might not. It is sad how often only one person in the marriage carries the weight of it. Now, do you not see how our short time together was most enlightening?"

"Yes, and I am suddenly regretting we do not have more of it."

They had come to a curve and Lady Klee came to a stop. "Whereas you should be thankful I do not make nagging demands that you spend your time with me."

Bowing politely as he took his leave. "Until we meet again."

Mark mounted his horse and set his hat to his head before nodding politely at her. He reined his horse away. A warm thread of desire coursed through his chest, ending right at his cock. He did not feel such a weight of ennui as he had this morning; in fact, he was quite looking forward to Friday and Saturday evening.

Helping the Baroness in her pursuit of pleasure.

## Chapter Three

Katrina wasn't a young girl who should be nervous about meeting a potential beau, yet she trembled as she waited for the carriage door to open.

Thursday had passed with relative normalcy, except for those moments alone when thoughts of Mark intruded with relentless purpose. An aching womb and throbbing nub were the physical price she had to pay for allowing her imagination free rein. English vocabulary did not have the words to describe the state of near arousal, the delicious need and the unsatisfied want that came with a body attuned to fulfillment. Well, not for ladies anyway.

His man opened the carriage door and held a hand out as she descended and looked up at the townhouse, now lit with candles. Her gaze went to the upper floor, where she believed Mark waited. She would not need any advanced play to induce her into a loving mood. Moisture already pooled between her legs.

She'd had a lover for two days and they'd yet to have intercourse. Anticipation swelled more than her emotions. Her breasts felt heavy and tight in her bodice. There would be no tender teasing. Tonight, they would join and she would see her needs met. Tonight, she would experience the fulfillment of her unspoken desires with a man unrivaled in the *ton*.

For Mark Turnbow was a man in every sense. He lacked the studious nature of her husband, but she wasn't here to read Robert Burns' poetry. She was here to caress the contours of Mark's strong shoulders, arms and chest. She was here to taste him, enjoy him, worship him.

Katrina instructed the footman to remove a small valise that contained a simple muslin dress, a pair of stockings and flat slippers, along with a robe and rail. A mistress might also be inclined toward extras—she'd placed three of her *diletto* inside—especially if she might be considered experienced. On the first night, she had not given thought past the negotiations and then she had not thought past what he would do next with his mouth.

While it was possible to be abed and naked for several hours, she could not imagine all their time would be in a state of undress, humorous as that seemed while she was sneaking into her lover's home. She was well read and intellectual bordering on inappropriate by *ton* standards. She'd read nearly all the Russian classical literature, in the original, and she suspected few could converse with her about such great works.

Would that she could find an equilibrium with Mark. A physical and mental companionship, where they could connect by firelight—first in body and then in soul. An aggressive firing of flesh and then a quiet kindling of thoughts and dreams and wishes.

A smile crossed her lips, one that was out of proportion to her inane thoughts.

Mark stood in the foyer, dressed in superfine, his cravat perfectly tied, as if he too had gone to a ball and snuck away. His hands were behind his back.

She wore a black, full-length cape. Tugging at the ties, she separated the piece and the footman took it and her valise—the scene repeating itself—except Mark did not speak.

His jaw seemed clenched tight and his gaze was hard and direct.

He strolled toward her, her breath hitched as his arms encircled her waist. He leaned toward her. His mouth descended upon hers, rough and demanding—hungry, as she was.

Taste wasn't something she thought about as it pertained to a man, but she tasted him—his maleness, his aggression, his need. All of it combined to make her want, driving her mindlessly onward.

"I want you inside me," she whispered, sounding decadent and naughty to her own ears. And truthful. What did that make her? Offering herself? Demanding he service her?

"The stairs aren't carpeted yet," he said against her neck, as he trailed his mouth over her skin, finally licking over the curl of her ear.

"Anywhere," she said.

He pushed her against the wall next to the newel post. The thud vibrated through her. She thrust her hips into his groin, coming into hard contact with his erect member. His mouth seemed fastened to hers. She battled with his tongue, nipped at his lips, tore at his cravat.

Mark's hands worked at her hips, gathering her skirts in a bunch at her waist. He gripped her thigh and lifted her leg around his waist. She'd known undergarments were unnecessary, but the brush of his bare cock along the wet seam between her thighs had her squirming. He'd been busy freeing himself while she seemed only to be losing control.

"This may hurt," he said.

Did he think she was a virgin? She turned her face away from his kiss, gasping for air.

The sweet touch of his cock against the pulsing entrance of her sheath was followed by a hard slam against her body as he shoved into her—deep, unforgiving, desperate. She groaned. Mark's body pressed hard into her, pinning her to the wall and holding her firmly in his will.



He trembled against her, trying to still his need. His hot breath burned against her neck. She wanted to blaze with him.

She listened to the sound of their panting and the crinkling sound of her dress as they moved. Fever consumed her.

“Is that all you?” she gasped. Glorious, hard cock filled her. She had missed this, more than she remembered.

He slammed into her again, settling her, making her feel weak against his superior sexuality and strength.

“Again,” she said. She clutched her arms about his neck, lifting her bottom, giving him room to move again. He drove into her, groaning as he did so. Between her thighs, she felt his hips cant and plunge as he started a rhythmic, mesmerizing in-and-out movement that seemed to touch every nerve, fulfilling every hungry need.

She trembled with the force of their joining. What would it be like if she cared? If his lips kissed with a gentle purpose greater than just driving demand? Her limbs, already weak, grew heavy under the lethargic spread of pleasure.

His mouth found hers again, and she answered him kiss for kiss. The tension in her body spread in tender waves until she felt taut, ready to break but determined to hold fast to the pleasure coursing through her.

Tightness spread low in her back. She threw her head back and Mark pushed deep, holding her in an intractable lock against the wall. She convulsed—hard, racking spasms shot through her and gripped at his cock.

He groaned, and she relished that he spilled his desire deep into the recesses of her body. Sponges allayed most concern for pregnancy—an unromantic, practical thought as his cock eased from her body.

Mark’s heaviness squeezed against her. His warmth surrounded her, his hand still braced her thigh. The disconcerting drip of semen slid down her leg.

Somehow, they untwined without much embarrassment. Her skirts floated downward, and he worked at the placket of his trousers but left his cravat loose about his neck. Replete with desire and weak at the knees, her will was the only thing keeping her on her feet.

His arm slid around her waist again, a welcome support. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, feeling the strangeness of casual conversation with him. Not that they couldn’t find common ground, but to discuss the mundane after such cataclysmic interaction seemed a waste of words. Should they not now lie beside one another and spill their secrets, or recite the poetry she’d so recently ridiculed, or discuss philosophical treatise? Oh, they must. She would learn everything she could about

him.

In the end, she would be the mistress he'd forever remember.

"Come. There is wine in the bedroom," he offered.

Wine. The solution to every awkwardness.

"That is just what I need," she said, and placed her hand to his arm as he escorted her up the stairs as if they hadn't just rutted with animalistic fever.

Inside the room, she saw her valise near the armoire and her cape neatly hanging beside it, making her feel more at ease. Mark stepped away from her and worked out of his jacket. His white linen shirt appeared stark against the grey-black of his waistcoat. He poured a drink, but did not remove his hand from the tapered neck of the bottle.

She proceeded to undress, working at the buttons at the back of her gown. He stood still on his side of the room and she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. Mark Turnbow was very finely made, she thought. She knew she wasn't alone in her admiration and turned to display the best of her bosom.

She'd chosen the dress for its effect—tight fitting at the waist and then flaring outward. Lady Price-Russell's ball required that she dazzle before she quietly took her leave. On the dance floor, she had completed two full sets including a waltz. Mark had not shown himself. Would she have acknowledged him if he had?

When she was out of her dress, her underthings followed until she was naked. Mark had turned toward her, his gaze dark and hooded. She reached for the coverings and turned them back slowly before bracing her knee against the bed.

"Will you be joining me?"

It was much easier to be a wife, she thought, but then frowned as she realized the conundrum. She was no longer the woman dependent on the tender impulses of husband. Mark wanted a mistress until the time he married again. The unfamiliar role would require the cleverest of feminine wiles and a stirring of imagination.

So far she had contributed little—his sexual aggressiveness had provided all of the impetus they needed. She was determined he not know of her inexperience while she explored. She was more than willing to take this journey with him, under his tutelage and generosity.

She stepped back from the bed, walked around the end, holding the post as she did so. She hid nothing as she slowly strolled toward him, capturing his complete attention with ease.

Mistresses made men forget about marriages and entanglements, worries and failures. And they helped celebrate victories, fortunes and

successes.

It was time to make Mark forget with a little celebration.

Mark had a hard time breathing, let alone talking to Katrina. His erection had surged as he walked the stairs. A happy circumstance, one he hadn't experienced much since his randy youth; once having spent, he was usually done for a few hours. Men might boast of sexual prowess and multiple conquests, but it was a special thing to experience this sort of fierce need burning in his groin and have his body respond quickly.

As she approached, he swallowed back the rest of his drink, realizing he'd forgotten to offer her one. It was understandable considering the heady release he'd just experienced, pounding into her and discharging the product of his body and the enormous amount of pent up vigor he'd been storing the last two days.

Her hands caressed his chest before she tugged at his cravat and allowed it to fall to the floor. Each button on his waistcoat and shirt was popped open with a quick flick of her lovely, slender fingers. She pushed his waistcoat down his arms. Before his shirt was off, her hands slid inside, brushing over his chest and soothing along the contours of his muscles. Her thumbs brushed over the sensitive tips that seemed womanishly hard under her soft touch.

She spread the sides of his shirt and set her mouth and tongue to the dark disk on his left side. He'd always known he was embarrassingly susceptible to sexual stimulation against his nipples.

A rush of air leapt from his mouth as blood surged in his loins. Years ago with his first woman, he had discharged when she'd pulled his nipple into her mouth. He was better prepared now—but not by much.

His cock ached with renewed fierceness, demanding relief inside of her body, perhaps her lovely mouth.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, glancing up at him, her gaze somnolent and trusting.

"What you are doing." He barely choked out the words. She put her mouth to his chest again, sucking gently. His eyelids eased shut but popped back open when she slid her hand inside his trousers and caressed his aching cock.

He braced one hand behind him, rattling the tray of flasks and bottles.

He'd just shagged her roughly, ejaculated thoroughly, and he was in worse condition now. The bed seemed an ocean away. He fumbled at his trousers. Somehow he freed himself from her grip, turned her toward the wall where she braced her hands, then he bent at his

knees. His cock came up between the sweet valley of her thighs while he gazed down at her pretty peach of an ass.

His large hand gripped the back of her neck. He shoved into her, bringing her to her toes. With a few thrusts, his trousers and small clothes fell past his knees, hung up by the tops of his boots.

He canted and rammed. Over and over she took him. Her feminine mewls only encouraged his brutish behavior, taking her more as if she were a whore than a long-term investment in pleasure. Thinking of her as a lady did not stop him or change the fact he wanted to shag her until neither of them could walk.

For a second time, he spilled into her—copious amounts of fluid by the feel of each surging release.

And by the slick feel of her as he surged the last few times. He withdrew from her body, the sound a weirdly disgusting slurp that would have shamed him with his wife. Katrina moaned, then stretched like a street tabby scratching its claws against a post.

Was he this randy because it had been so long since he'd had an illicit relationship? Or was it because she was the first woman he'd ever had who was openly, assertively interested in pursuing unexplored realms of pleasure?

He stumbled to a chair, where he shed his boots and the rest of his clothing. She poured herself a drink and ambled slowly toward the bed, ignoring him for the moment. She gulped it down, then licked at her lips—she was Russian, he shouldn't be surprised at her capacity to drink. His gaze followed her even as his fingers fumbled to do as his mind commanded.

The graceful lines of her back curved into the lush roundness of the sweetest ass he'd ever seen.

She did not rush to cover her body. She did not vainly babble.

Her cool reserve was evident in all she had done thus far, yet he could feel the draw of heat in the way she looked at him, touched him and fucked him.

"Would you like another drink?" he asked, pushing to his feet and feeling, at last, capable of standing. He turned in time to watch her stretch out on the bed, on her stomach, her feet hanging over and her head resting on her arm.

"I'm fine, thank you."

She made room from him as he approached the bed. He was certain he had not seen so much naked woman at such length. He couldn't tear his gaze away no matter how he tried. He sat on the bed, drink in hand. Katrina ran her fingers over his stomach. A sharp contraction rippled through his muscles. Her hand was uncomfortably close to his still raging need.

“So, my Lord Compton, you have a mistress. What else should I know about you?”

“If you listen to the *ton* gossips, you probably know all there is to know.”

“But how much is true?”

“Depends on what you’ve heard.”

“Some drivel. Some curiosities. Some conjecture.”

“Does any of it really matter?”

Mark had thought the Baroness was the one who was difficult to know. While he found it easy to share his body with her, divulging his life history to a woman he didn’t know seemed too complex, too demanding. He was not ready to so disarm himself. Or to arm her with those things one shared only with the most trusted confidant. It was easy to boast when one was a complete success.

However, over the past several months he had discovered something about himself he did not like.

He had believed honor was inbred into his very being. But when the family faced its worst crisis, he had allowed his sister—*his sister*—to sacrifice herself for the sake of the family name.

The circumstances were a damning statement about him. Christina had confided in him and he had done nothing to stop her. It was little consolation that she would have done it with or without his consent.

And why he should have worried, he didn’t know. Once John died and Mark became the earl, many women would have been happy to be the countess. Susannah and her family had calculated, and schemed, since he was being honest. They’d played their hand perfectly, in wait for the possibility Mark would inherit.

Maybe he had panicked as he’d seen that his lifestyle and respectability could be diminished. Though it had worked out in the most astonishing manner, he was still troubled by his part in the play and what it revealed about his character.

Perhaps he was paying for all of his sins now.

Strangely, since Christina’s marriage, his new brother-in-law Dane had never uttered a word of condemnation. Nor had Christina.

“Why do we not talk of something more interesting?” He ran a finger along Katrina’s side, tracing one of those lines at her waist that marked her as a mother.

“My children?” She laughed and rolled to her back. “I would have thought child-rearing the most boring of subjects to a man like you.”

Maybe it was interesting because he was asking the question of an uninhibited naked woman.

“I have three sons. All fine boys who much resemble my father, or

at least my side of the family. There are days when I would sell them to gypsies, though.”

Sons. Multiple children. A pang of unwanted, regretful longing shot through his chest.

“But they are my life,” she said.

“A blessing, to be sure.” He traced the line again, musing about his loss. “A fertile goddess.”

“Oh. I have taken precautions,” she assured him. “You needn’t worry you will suddenly inherit your own blessing.”

He gave her a half smile before reaching for the covers and pulling them over her hips and to his waist. A twist of pain tore at his heart. He fought to hold back any of his emotions.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. She buried her face in his chest. “Forgive me. I wasn’t thinking of your circumstances.”

When he didn’t say anything, she snuggled closer, not helping his composure. Her sympathetic gaze turned soft and wistful. “Someday you will remarry and have other children. Sometimes we think the loss of a child only affects the mother, but you’ve been doubly hurt. A child and an heir. It is unfortunate and very sad. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It was a tragedy,” he said carefully.

“I cannot imagine.” She pressed a kiss to his chest. “I don’t know what I would do without my sons.”

He had closed his eyes and braced one hand behind his head. “Susannah had seemed so healthy. One understands the realities of childbirth, but I never dreamt such a tragedy would befall us. Even with a physician in attendance, she succumbed. My son hadn’t a chance.”

The Baroness whispered consoling words. “A little boy. Oh, the poor darling.”

For his part, Mark did not seem to be able to stop the flow of words, as distressing as it had seemed so recently.

“Even before he was born, I had imagined the life he would have. One that would be the product of all the ingenuity and luck I could cobble together. I wanted to pass on an earldom that held all the promise and purpose a respected title should hold. I wanted it to be... not necessarily easier for him, but better.”

He had been determined not to reveal his greatest failure. Instead, he revealed his greatest weakness—he had longed for this child and had hoped with ridiculous desire to have a son.

Behind his eyelids, the sting of tears burned, trying to escape.

Remembering.

He had demanded everyone leave the room. The evidence of Susannah's struggle was strewn about, but she lay peacefully in repose with her eyes closed. Their son lay tucked beneath her arm, cleaned and swaddled, as if he were but sleeping.

Mark had held him to his chest, weeping uncontrollably into the blankets. Susannah had wanted to name him after her father.

"You must mourn them properly," the baroness said.

He had suffered in silence.

"Do you wish to be alone?"

Alone? Hadn't that driven him to seek a mistress in the first place? Hadn't John's death and his sisters' marriages left a hole that only grew wider at the loss of Susannah and their son?

"No. I want you to stay."

He brushed his hand over her shoulder before he lowered his body to the bed. He reached for the candlewick and snubbed it quickly. Katrina resettled at his side.

"Someday you will want to talk of them," she said quietly. "I would be happy to listen when you are ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

The faraway call of chimes told Katrina it was time to go. She'd lain beside Mark enjoying the companionable comfort and warmth of her lover through the night, while she dozed in fits and starts. He'd slept soundly once he was on his back.

Pain pierced her heart. As a mother, she could feel the depth of his sorrow, but she could not lead him where he was not ready to go. What he had expressed was heartbreaking enough.

As a woman and his lover, she basked in the surrounding heat of their bodies. Such comfort could not be purchased, not really.

A moment later, she heard the rattle of the carriage wheels on cobblestone and the unhappy snorts of the harnessed horses.

She rubbed her hand over Mark's chest. "The carriage is here. I must go," she whispered.

The dark glint of his eyes told her he was awake. "Not yet," he said, sleepy huskiness in his voice. He covered her hand that lay on his chest and then guided her downward until her palm warmed to his hardened cock. "I wish to give you a proper farewell."

"I will return this evening," she reminded him.

"And I will be sure to give you a proper greeting then."

His hand glided to her hip and he neatly lifted her over his body. Her legs straddled his hips, wedging his cock firmly between the heated valley of her thighs. Sticky moisture still remained, and she

shared it with him with a quick cant of her hips and a gentle rub along the length of his cock.

He pulled the covers over them, the first hint of modesty the two of them had shared, if one considered the room was very nearly dark and a bit chilly.

When his hands found her hips again, he eased her on to his cock. She liked the sound of his moaning satisfaction as she took his length deep in her body.

Perhaps because it was early and they were still sleepy, but their joining was much more subdued and sensual. He canted his hips in an easy rhythm underneath her. She rocked slowly, taking his erection with slow in-and-out movements while she lay over his chest. The heat between them coursed through her, melted her, until her body sheltered his. She lazily toyed with his hardened nipples.

Her arousal was gentle and steady. As she soared toward the peak, she pushed up from his chest and took him deep, squeezing her inner muscles, fighting to keep her place amongst the blissful clouds of release.

Suddenly, she was under Mark as he finished with several fast, deep thrusts that woke her completely. He jerked, each eliciting a satisfying groan.

She ran her hands over his back. Warm. Solid. All man. She missed this connection and would miss it terribly once they went their separate ways, which she could not think of now. Not now, when it was all so new and exciting.

He held himself over her for a moment before rolling to his side and bracing his head with his hand. "Good morning, Baroness," he said.

"Good morn to you." She pressed a kiss to his chest. He moved on his side of the bed. "No, don't get up. I will see myself out," she said.

"Let me help you."

She had already grabbed her chemise, letting it slide over her head and down her body. "There's no need for both of us to be inconvenienced."

"You could stay."

"I could, but I won't," she said. She dressed quickly, leaving a few of the buttons at the back of her dress undone, knowing her cape would cover it until she reached the privacy of her home and boudoir.

Mark didn't listen. She saw a flash of skin, dark in the pre-dawn hours but still distinctly man. He pushed his arms into a robe and proceeded to light a candle.

Her decision to become Mark's mistress was a private one. A sick feeling welled in her stomach at the thought of her sons knowing their



mother had a lover. Ivan was a young man—he might understand the need, but she didn't think forgiveness would be an easy thing. He would see it as a betrayal of his father. She didn't think the younger two would grasp the concept of a lover, not yet anyway. If she phrased it correctly? Her particular friend? A friend like Geral had been? They might be more accepting of such a notion, but could she take the chance? And could she trust Peter?

Peter would see it as a confirmation she was unworthy of the Klee name, if he found out. She believed she could keep the affair secret; they weren't meeting so often that it would be obvious to *ton* gossips. And she only had to be circumspect until Mark married. Having experienced the Earl of Compton firsthand, sadly, she thought that event might happen before she was ready to let him go.

Still, she doubted he would marry before his mourning was complete, and the prospect of the many months with him made her delirious with joy. This was for her, all for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katrina settled into the role of lover with an ease that astonished her. Their secret rendezvous had been working like a charm. Just when she missed him desperately, it was time to go back. The past few weeks passed like a dream, with no one the wiser.

Happiness was nearly as obvious as the newest fashion—she wore it openly for all the world to see. Perhaps it was a little dangerous. At balls, she played the coquette, feeling a confidence with men she had never experienced. Maybe it was the assurance she was desired. Maybe it was that she never had to wait more than two days to see Mark, knowing he was just as anxious to see her.

So, it was with great disappointment she penned him a note on the following Thursday to say she would be unavailable for the next day. She would still try to meet him Saturday.

Peter Klee popped in and out of her life with an irregularity that seemed to imply he did it to inconvenience her rather than for any specific regard he had for those to whom he was guardian.

If he was in London, she had to be the perfect widow and mother.

He leaned against the mantle in her living room. She supposed he was handsome, but he had no title and he only owned a modest home and mill in Surrey—far enough that she did not have to see him each week, but not so far that he stayed away.

“We will leave the first week in September. I know the boys are most anxious for the trip to begin.”

“I haven't agreed yet, Peter. The boys might be enthusiastic, but there is much to consider before such a decision is made.”

“Nonsense. If you wish your sons to become men, you will embrace the idea and begin packing their bags.”

“Sergei and Claud have never spent more than a day from under the protection of my home. They are not ready to travel such a distance and be gone such a time.”

“You mean *you’re* not ready. Lud, Katrina, would you have them faint at the sight of blood? Swoon when they cannot embrace their mother before bedtime? Samuel would be disappointed that they’ve done nothing this past year except hide beneath your skirts.”

Theirs was an age-old argument. He thought she smothered them. She had known it was a natural overprotective urge rooted in Samuel’s untimely death. For young boys who admired their father, a year was not so much time to grieve while they healed.

Anyway, Peter was wrong. They had been to Brighton two months ago. She’d given them free rein to wonder the piers and rocky beaches, fishing and exploring as they would so long as they were home by nightfall. And during the winter, she had gone to a weekend house party, leaving them to their studies and secrets.

She was not smothering them—she was making herself available to them should they need her, yet allowing them time to be on their own.

And Peter was being deceitful. A four-week trip could easily turn into eight weeks if the weather was bad or, heaven forbid, something went wrong.

“Why not a less arduous first trip? Perhaps the hunting is plentiful in Derbyshire?”

“We are going to Scotland.”

“There is plenty of time to decide,” she said.

“Speaking of decisions, I would have your answer, Katrina, about the other matter we discussed.”

“We are not marrying. I have made this clear.”

“You are out of mourning. Do you not think it time to take on the mantle of wife? Samuel would not have wanted you to pine.”

“And you are his brother. I cannot bring myself to marry in such a fashion, regardless of your admiration,” she said with care.

She watched as his jaw clenched. He reached for his watch. “I should enjoy dining with my nephews this evening,” he said.

“Naturally. The table will be set at eight.”

She was thankful this small home was hers—the doors were hers to open and close. Peter was well aware that she required him to write before he arrived.

“And will you be attending the Stanhope’s ball this evening?”

Of course, that was why he was in London. As friendship went—sometimes unexplainable, sometimes inconvenient—Samuel had been fast friends with the Stanhopes. Should it surprise her they would extend that friendship to his brother?

“Certainly.”

“I shall accompany you. The countess was good enough to invite me.”

“My plans were to go alone.”

“Katrina,” he said with a weary demeanor, as if he corrected an errant child. “An escort is always preferable to being unaccompanied.”

Missing her time with Mark was a huge disappointment. Spending that same time with Peter watching her all evening was a misfortune indeed.

Dinner went smoothly, the children enjoying their uncle’s company. She’d never spoken ill of him, nor would she, but she was wary of his motivation. Instinctively, she knew to stay away from him. He wasn’t of the same character as Samuel.

By ten, they were in the carriage.

“You’ve done a fine job with them, Katrina. I did not mean to criticize.”

“When you have children, you will understand protectiveness.”

“I’m sure I will. Have you thought anymore about your return to Russia? Ivan says you talk of it more and more.”

“In time. When the boys are ready.”

“As their guardian, you realize I will not allow the boys to depart until they are of an age. Ivan is the baron now. He will need to run the estate and he will have other responsibilities.”

“Two farms can be managed from St. Petersburg.”

“Nevertheless.”

She toed a fine line. If he didn’t hold such sway over their finances and such influence in the direction their lives took, she would bundle them up and depart tomorrow.

Mark would find another mistress. She was not sure she would be lucky enough to find such an uncomplicated, giving lover.

Once the carriage rolled to a stop, Peter reached for her as she stepped from the carriage. The line into the house was at least ten couples in length. She had to introduce him, as many of those in attendance did not know the second son of a minor baron or the brother of a deceased one.

He kept to her side as they made their way around the room. Katrina had already finished a glass of wine and several men had asked her to dance. Peter had reserved the first set with her, which

she felt obliged to give since she had arrived with him.

At eleven, she yearned to escape to her lover's arms.

At midnight, she yearned for her bed.

At one, she stood in the supper line examining a tray of familiar hors d'oeuvres.

"Beluga caviar." The words were whispered near her ear and she tingled with anticipation. "The second-best export from Russia."

Mark.

"Oh? And what is the best export from Russia?"

He stood beside her, not touching her and pretending an interest in the fare spread out before them. "Their women. Is your dance card full?"

"No, but—"

"We haven't been seen together in two weeks," he said quietly. "No one will know I will be seeing you naked in my arms while we dance."

"You mustn't."

"I missed you. The day was nearly beyond my endurance. All is well, Baroness?"

He glanced at her then, a dark look, melting her from the inside out. Desire coursed through her. In her chest, a painful pressure built.

"Yes. Thank you for asking."

"And that dance?"

She lifted her card, held it for his inspection, and they made arrangements.

He bowed then. "Until later."

Anyone who had seen their interaction would have thought it all quite proper, for which she was thankful. But his closeness made her body come to life and her imagination take flight.

He crossed the room, engaging a small group of men while she took a seat next to Lady Stanhope to chat before the next set began.

Then she danced with a viscount, a marquess and finally the earl, for whom she was waiting. Ah, to be held in his arms.

Mark swept her onto the dance floor with little more than a word.

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet you tonight," she said.

"I've no doubt you will make it up to me."

"Oh, I will."

He smiled and squeezed her hand lightly. "I envied every man with whom you danced."

"None of them mattered."

"Peter Klee seems to think you are his betrothed."

She stumbled, but Mark covered for her, holding her securely. "Betrothed?"

"To hear him tell it, and I did hear him tell it, he has painted himself as your savior."

"I have my own set of family problems. Peter seems to think I'm desperate to be married and he is my only option."

"Is he the reason you couldn't join me?"

"Yes."

"You've told him no?"

"Several times. My husband appointed Peter the guardian of my children. Let me just say it has been inconvenient."

"He does not trouble you, does he?" Mark's brow furrowed as he asked the question.

Such a protective gesture was welcome. As a widow, one could flaunt convention to a certain degree. She knew she tread a fine line. Having Mark hold her hand while she did so provided a sense of balance.

"You must smile, Lord Compton. I would not have people question my ability to dance."

He did then—nothing overdone, just a quick hint that all was well. "No one would believe such a thing. I feel as though I am holding a cloud."

She laughed lightly. "A cloud? I've never been thusly compared."

"So, if I have inferred correctly, your Mr. Klee might frown upon activities unbecoming of a baroness?"

"Most assuredly."

"Then we shall have to keep him in the dark."

"I'm happy you are here," she said. Composure was more difficult when one felt the need to hide enthusiasm and keep secrets.

"But in keeping with our agreement, I will be most circumspect about showing up announced. Now, before this waltz ends, tell me what you will do for me the next time you are naked in my arms. I must have some morsel of encouragement for when I might next expect my ladybird to perch in my bedchamber."

She leaned closer. "So the cock crows. Let us just be adventurous and see where the night takes us."

The orchestra was drawing the music to a close. "I am kissing you now."

"And I am kissing you back."

Katrina curtsied and Lord Compton bowed most severely. He held out his arm and she placed her fingers on his sleeve before he led her from the crowded floor. Katrina turned her back to him and made her

way toward a group of women with whom she walked.

For the rest of the evening, she gave all of her attention to whomever she spoke, unwilling to be distracted by the thought that Mark was across the room, or beside her or watching her. Or thinking about her as she was him.

Only when she was again upon Peter's arm being escorted from the ball did she seek Mark out, and then only with a circumspect glance.

His gaze met hers, heated and direct.

She might as well have burst into flames in front of the entire gathering.

## Chapter Four

Katrina arrived before Mark and hurried to their bedroom, anxious to be with him again and not just dancing for a few minutes at a stuffy ball.

When she stepped into the room, Mark was already there.

“You’re early,” he said.

He was already in his robe, standing at the single window. He had been looking down into the darkened street. Waiting for her arrival, she suspected.

She rushed to him and flung herself in his arms. “Has it only been a few days?”

“Only.”

“You must strip me of these clothes and ravish me. I demand it.” She tore at the bindings of her cape.

He turned her quickly and worked at the buttons. “One ravishment, coming up.” Her dress and underclothing came off piece by piece only to be flung aside as they worked their way toward the bed.

She pushed the lapels of his robe aside and stared at the beautiful, sculpted lines of his body. Katrina would never have described the physical act of sex as joyous, but that is what she felt. Giddy. As if laughter were about to burst from her in an uncontrollable and embarrassing display.

“Don’t be gentle.”

He sat on the bed and grabbed her by the wrist before pulling her toward him. Her body slammed into his as he fell backward. She clawed his chest before she bent down and bit at his neck. He rolled with her, his feet braced against the floor before he hooked his arms about her knees and opened her wide.

“Lud, don’t wait. I need you now,” she said.

He bent his knees, allowing his cock to trail along the wet seam leading to her lady’s chamber. The tip of his cock caught and he pushed hard and deep.

They both gasped at the taking.

“Yes. More. More. More,” she said. She ran her hands down his arms, then dug her nails into his shoulders.

He fixed her legs higher, wrapping them about his neck before he fell forward, braced on his hands, and began pumping into her. His gaze was upon her and she couldn’t help but stare deep into his eyes. She couldn’t stop the smile on her lips either, since her position

allowed her little freedom of movement and demonstrated a strange flexibility she didn't know she had.

"I'd never...known...what...shagging...was. Before now," she said, but with an effort to draw air.

"And do you like it?" He pushed hard before he moved one hand low on her belly and shoved into her again. The blissful pleasure had her grabbing the sheets for purchase. She flexed her legs, pulling him closer. Fire consumed her. Passion had never burned hotter.

"I never...ever...want anything else."

"And I must agree. Your slice of life is the best I've had."

With a quick movement, he pulled from her and turned her to her stomach. Her knees were barely braced at the edge of the bed. It didn't matter. When he surged back into her from behind, he nearly knocked her into the middle of the bed.

She joined him, rocking back and forth, meeting his thrusting demands. She clenched her eyes shut as a forceful wave constricted inside. "Ohhhh," she groaned. "Oh, God, Mark."

She turned her face into the bed covers and screamed. And screamed again with each pulsing surge that gripped her body.

She was aware that Mark was in the midst of his own climatic throes, jerking and pounding into her, slowing as he released in great moaning heaves.

They crumpled to the bed together, gasping for breath.

She turned to him, her fingers tracing over his chest. She sat up, leaned over him and kissed his distended nipple. "I need more. I need so much more."

"Baroness, you've taken my all."

She lifted one of her legs, opening for him. Guiding his hand, she used his fingers to trace between her thighs, wet with his release. She directed him to the swollen nub hidden by the soft folds of her sex.

"A woman who knows what she wants," he said.

When he took to the task, she went to her back, allowing her legs to fall open. He took the opportunity to lean over her and suck at her breast.

"Yes," she said with moaning repetition. "Yes."

He circled slowly, tugged occasionally and slid fingers into her at surprising intervals that caused her to gasp.

"You have wonderful hands," she said.

He kissed the soft flesh around her nipples. "Just what a man wants to hear after having swived a woman to madness."

"And you have a nice cock too." She reached for him, barely able to move in her current state. Cupping him, she found he was firming



up nicely.

When she started moaning under his ministrations, she gave up any need to touch him. She could enjoy this state of blissful repose as long as Mark kept her wet.

Her second release was gentle and lengthy, her hips rocking into his hands with each pulsing contraction.

They rested side-by-side, not bothering with words. Katrina didn't have any. There were only so many words to describe utter contentment.

"Baroness?"

"I fear we are well beyond proprieties, Mark. You must call me Katrina. And I will be your complete slave if you promise always, always to use your mouth in such a way upon my breasts."

"My slave?"

"Complete."

"Let me make sure I'm doing this right. That is, if I am to keep you as a slave."

He bent over her again and gazed at her breasts. With one hand, he cupped her. His tongue flicked over the hard nub.

"Like that?"

"You know what I want."

"I'm fast learning." He set his mouth over her, taking in her nipple and sucking gently on her flesh.

She arched upward, then ran her fingers through his hair. She fisted a handful of it and forced him to her will. "Now here," she said. She guided him to her other breast and sighed as he laved with the same attention.

"You make me insane with want," she said. "How is that possible?"

"And I'm barely man enough to keep up."

"Oh, you are," she said. "I just need to be satiated with you, drowned. Completely filled."

"I think I know what you really want." He reached over her, toward her nightstand drawer. The crisp hairs of his chest rasped over her body.

Katrina felt her face heat. "Don't." She clutched his hand.

"It's private, I know. But is anything between us private?"

"Am I wanton?" she asked as he pulled one of the *diletto* from the drawer. He held the thick one—the one she'd used the night she had decided to become his mistress.

"No. You are everything a man wants in a mistress."

She scrambled to her knees as Mark leaned into a pile of pillows,

his back against the headboard. "Would you—"

"Katrina, I might weep if you told me I couldn't."

She flung her arms about his neck again and rained kisses on his face. "This...you... It is all too perfect."

"I want to watch you," he said.

She backed away, settling on her haunches. Biting at her lip, she reached for the *diletto*. "And then you will...?"

"Yes."

She went to her knees, near Mark's thighs as they stretched out beside her. His gaze had settled on her, low, where she held the crafted phallus.

With a slow, practiced hand, she swiped the head of the glass phallus between her legs. She was wet with desire and Mark's semen.

"What do you think about?" he asked. His voice had lowered. His gaze remained fixed on the activity between her legs.

The truth was a potent aphrodisiac. He wanted her.

"When I used this last, I was thinking about you."

She placed the tip of it at the entrance of her sheath. She pushed in slowly. Mark's jaw clenched and his nostrils flared as the faux erection disappeared into her body.

"I dreamt you were inside me. All long and hard and vigorous." She mimicked the act of lovemaking. The slow thrusting was arousing but not so stimulating as watching Mark's reaction and his need flame to life.

His cock swelled while she watched him.

"It was the first time I'd thought about being with you intimately."

"The night I asked you to be my mistress?"

"Yes."

"Did it make you wet?"

"Not at first. Not until I started thinking about what you would be like. My imagination wasn't as good as reality."

"On your back, Katrina."

She removed the instrument and eased downward. He swung one leg over her and then grabbed her thighs, bringing her closer. She lay between his legs, her knees crooked and her feet braced on the outside of his thighs.

"Again."

The command was brusque and she obliged, enjoying the effect it had on him. The *diletto* slid inside with ease. His large hands smoothed down her thighs, on the inside, while he pushed her apart.

His eyelids eased downward. His gaze focused on nothing but the

in-and-out rhythm until he batted her hand away and gripped the leather end of the phallus.

Why it should feel different with his hand gripping the piece, she didn't know, but her arousal climbed from lazy to needy. She brushed her hands along his legs and thighs, all she could reach of him.

"Slow?" he asked.

"Yes." Air escaped in one large sigh.

When he placed his fingers neatly over the skin hooding the hidden nub and rubbed while he slowly thrust, Katrina moaned.

"Has anyone done this for you before?"

"No. Never. It's so good. Don't talk," she said, words tumbling out, for the first time feeling free enough to say what she felt, demand what she needed. She cupped her breasts and kneaded. Another rolling release swept over her body. Mark held the *diletto* deep, instinctively knowing what she needed and how she wanted it.

Mark was strong. She enjoyed how he lifted her, positioned her and took her with ease. He'd left the *diletto* at the side of the bed and had her up and straddling him, sliding onto his cock as if he meant to keep her there.

"How much more can you take?"

"All night," she said.

"You're going to be sore soon."

"Really? I can't get enough of you." She wrapped her arms about his neck. She braced her elbows on his shoulders and her hands flitted through his hair. Their shared kiss expressed nothing of the wild passion they'd been experiencing, only a brief tender, caress, tongue to tongue before their lips touched tenderly.

"You taste like fire," she said.

Their lips met again.

"And you taste like ice."

She giggled and pressed her breasts to his chest. "I wish I would have known it could be like this."

She tried to ride him but he gripped her hips, holding her in place. Keeping her deep.

"Not so fast. I want to enjoy it this time." His mouth descended to her breast, sucking once again on her already sensitive nipple. He traced a string of kisses along her collarbone. "This doesn't always have to be about rushing headlong and heedless, crashing into walls."

Their foreheads were pressed together in intimacy. "But it is so wonderful," she whispered.

"Let it be wonderful in every way."

"Oh, Mark. You don't know."

“Let me show you.”

She had been reckless, throwing caution to the wind, trying to get everything she could and quickly. But the slow, warm and quiet times were good too.

“Whatever you want,” she murmured. He nudged into her once but seemed more intent on kissing her and her breasts. At least she could breathe.

The pleasure was the same, but drawn out in long, breathless sighs. Mark held her tight, refusing her satisfaction. All the same, she was replete and boneless beneath the slow teasing and touching.

“Stay as you are,” he ordered.

Why would she want to move? Beneath her was the most exciting man of her acquaintance. Her eyelids peeked open as she watched him reach into the drawer again and retrieve her bottle of lavender oil. One hand held her wrist, keeping her immobile; the other worked at the stopper and then poured oil over the *diletto*.

“I know of something you may like. Are you willing to try?”

“With you? Anything.”

“Kiss me,” he said. “Like you mean it.”

She cupped his face. His tongue met hers, tangled, thrusting deeply into her mouth before biting at her lips.

The slick feel of the *diletto* soothed along the crevice of her bottom. She arched. Her eyes popped open and she took a deep breath.

“Shh. Still. This won’t hurt, but don’t fight against it.”

Even though he loosed his grip on her wrist, she couldn’t move. He searched her face, perhaps looking for her approval.

His free hand cupped her ass and spread her. The cool, gentle prod searched. Anxious fear welled in her chest. She’d heard whispers about pleasure—and pain. Was this part of it?

“Do you want me to stop?”

If she stopped now, would she discover all the pleasure there was to know? Would her resistance mean a quick end to their relationship?

He shoved again, pressing against her tight sphincter. Intruding because she had not said no.

She squeezed her lips together. Still no words would come, neither staying his hand nor encouraging him to go on.

Pressure continued to build. She felt the taut grimace on her face. Breathing came hard.

The next push breeched the tight ring. She gasped.

“That’s it. Pretend my cock is filling you. You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

His words were shocking, sending thrilling tingles up her spine.

Mark relaxed his grip and the *diletto* retreated.

“Mmm. More,” she said at last. More. More of anything he could give her.

As he pushed the *diletto* deep into her, she sank onto his shaft, unable to hold herself upright. His hips thrust, sending shards of pleasure outward. He did the same with the *diletto*.

She wrapped her hands around his neck, her fingers spearing into his hair and holding tight. She rested her forehead against his shoulder. “Mark,” she said. “Don’t ever stop.”

The soft jolting from his shaft and the dark pleasure in her bottom tossed Katrina to and fro. He would not bring her relief, but she felt nothing except the consuming fire building in her bones. Tension spread. She wanted to squirm against it, but she felt that if she moved, the pleasure would disappear. In her sheath and womb, gentle throbbing had started. It radiated outward, up her spine and to the tips of her nipples.

When release came, it was simple and wrenching. Her thighs and stomach quivered. He bent his head and tongued her nipples. Sucking, then licking. And again. The pleasure had no beginning and no end. Rolling through her body, taking every bit of self and leaving behind an empty vessel that needed neither food nor drink.

Only him.

Delirium overcame her—hot, fevered ecstasy where the only cure was Mark.

He took her on another slow journey, joining her in the end, the sound of his groaning pleasure giving her joy. She only remembered undulating waves and the wash of tears on her face.

She woke with a start and quietly dressed, hating she could not lie beside him and see every dawn to come.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Mark’s sisters got something in their heads, he usually had a hard time dissuading them. In this case, his two youngest sisters, both married within the past year—and both, in their words, mad for their husbands—had decided to trap him.

Normally, Mark could accept such an invitation with a healthy dose of sangfroid. What they did was outside his realm of concern. They had husbands now. Only when it involved him did he have reason to grumble.

Diane had informed him they had invited several single women to dine with them. Of course, there would be an equal number of bachelors along with chaperones and mamas, but he knew he was

being targeted for their stealthy, sisterly matchmaking. Diane had exclaimed, as recently as last week, "Oh, you mustn't be alone!"

In the month he had been with Katrina, he had not thought once about marriage. He had thought of little except the next time they could be together and what they would do with that time when it occurred.

He could honestly say he had never been in an association that was exclusively about sexual intercourse. The intimacy was intense, wildly entertaining and at times so deeply moving, he could not bear to have her leave his arms.

Neither of them brought their troubles to the townhouse. For his part, he thought outside influences might ruin the perfection of their affair.

He was not without awareness that she worried about her sons' guardian and the potential of being exposed as Mark's mistress. Having experienced such pleasure at her hands, he was ready to shout it to the world, but he would respect her wishes. Mark did not know Klee, but he knew men like him. Mark did know he could not embarrass Katrina or jeopardize their liaison.

Living two lives was an oddly discerning circumstance. On the days they were not together, he managed the earldom's single large estate, he was negotiating for the purchase of another, he traveled to Twenty Acres to discuss business and investment opportunities, and he played cards and danced at balls.

On those days, Lady Klee was on the periphery, just out of his reach. They'd met at the park on two other occasions. They'd run into each other at a ball last week. She made no move to acknowledge him at any time. He acceded to her wishes, though he had tallied and judged every man with whom she danced.

Strange little obsessions like this further eroded his good sense in keeping their relationship private. Revealing that she was his would have put a point to the matter. But even a mistress, a lady with some social standing in the Baroness's case, required gentlemanly treatment. He must do all he could to protect her reputation.

Diane and her husband Harold were on hand to greet him as he entered their home. Harold was the third son of a marquess with a thousand pounds a year in income. Mark was pleased he'd secured such stability for her.

Harold greeted him formally. "Lord Compton."

Diane kissed Mark's cheek. "You are the last to arrive."

He could hear the cacophony in the sitting room where everyone had gathered. "Should I just select a woman now and save us all time?"

“Where is the romance in that?” Diane said as she wound her arm in his.

“Don’t fight it, Mark. It only becomes more painful when you do,” Harold said.

“I think you know everyone,” Diane whispered as they came into the room.

“Miss Albert, Miss Stanton.” If there was anything ingrained into a noble, it was proper manners with young misses.

“Lord Compton,” they piped in unison while dipping into a curtsy. He could practically hear the giggles and sighs as he walked away. Mere girls, nowhere ready for the demands of marriage and family.

Mark saw her, a bright beacon on the shores of matchmaking misery. He continued greeting each of the guests until he got to Katrina. She greeted him properly, but he felt the light, inconspicuous squeeze of her hand.

Just as he was to turn away, he saw her mouth the words *I’m sorry*.

He smiled his assurance. It was too much to hope that the baroness would actually be seated beside him at supper.

Meg, the other sister responsible for this small soiree, came swooping down upon him, embracing him as if she had not seen him just yesterday.

Mark, being the ranking gentleman, led the widowed Countess of Newberry, a young, dewy-eyed reed of a woman whose husband had been killed in a horse riding accident about six weeks after they married.

Hopeful wishes gave way to reality when he was seated next to the youngest, silliest debs to have ever come out. The seating arrangement was Meg and Diane’s idea, so they obviously saw something he did not. And would not.

He was relieved each time they turned away to speak to the other men seated next to them. Even the food could not hold his attention, not when he wanted to prop his chin in his hand and moon over the woman he could not publicly acknowledge.

“Is it true you are related to the Romanovs?” one young buck was asking Lady Klee. The question elicited interest from all, and several inquiring faces turned toward her.

She laughed. “The family tree is convoluted, but that is the claim. Let me think, I believe forty-two people would have to die before one of my sons would be tsar, but Russia would be in full-scale revolt by the time three of them died, so I think it is safe to assume we will continue to live in happy obscurity. With our heads intact.”

Laughter sounded around the table.

“Russia’s loss is our gain,” another said.

“Are you hopeful to return one day?”

Mark forced his attention to his soup rather than watch the dotting admirers on her end of the table. *She is mine.*

“Oh, yes,” she said. She’d said those words to him too. On several occasions.

“I remember one Christmas I spent in St. Petersburg. Splendid architecture but bitterly cold, as I recall,” Lord Chambers said.

“Yes, the winds off the Baltic in winter can be cruel,” she said.

“And the politics in the Russian royal family even more so.”

Katrina lifted her glass in silent toast. “You have spoken wisely, Lord Chambers.”

“And your sons? Are they eager to return home?”

“Are not all exiles anxious for such an opportunity?”

“Lord Compton, have you been to Russia?” Miss Albert asked on his left.

Yes, he had been *in* Russia. Several times over the past month, and it wasn’t as cold as one might think.

“No, I haven’t.”

After he finished his queen soup, Mark signaled for a footman to pour more iced champagne. The *epergne* in the middle of the table held oyster pates and petit chicken pates. Normally, he would have indulged. Diane’s cook had come to them from France after studying under a culinary artist.

A second course included stewed beef and vegetables along with roasted turkey with truffles, morels and chestnuts. While he could not pretend to enjoy the company, he ought to at least enjoy the food or Diane and Meg would set upon him like hounds to a hare. It was hard to ignore that Katrina was the center of attention at her end of the table.

But it would be best to ignore Lady Klee and her roundtable knights, or he would have to acknowledge the stirring in his gut was both jealousy and obsession.

He would clarify with the Baroness that he expected exclusivity.

She was his.

After the final course and dessert, a moist gâteau covered with glazed preserved peaches, they all returned to the sitting room for a final drink before departing for the rounds of balls scheduled for the evening.

Mark escorted Miss Albert, who had been accompanied by the Countess Newberry, to her carriage. Back inside, he joined Meg and her husband for some small talk about the family before Lord Flynn



walked up escorting Katrina.

Flynn had taken a decided interest in all things Russian.

"Thank you, Lady Klee, for rounding out our numbers. When my sister told me Miss Jenkinson withdrew at the last moment, well, Diane was in a fit," Meg said.

"I was happy to repay a kindness." Katrina turned her violet gaze toward him. "Lord Compton, will you be about this evening? I have yet to find a partner who waltzes so divinely."

Surly as he felt, he actually managed a charming response. "There is no surer way to test one's grace than on the dance floor."

"Oh, I agree," she said, responding in kind. "The perfect partner must be confident and skilled in numerous steps." She broke the intense look before they traded innuendo that would cause questions, an easy misstep in the gossip-hungry Beau Monde. "And you, Lord Flynn? I rarely see you on the dance floor."

"I have two left feet, Lady Klee. My greatest skill at a ball is to sit in a chair and play cards."

"Practice makes perfect, Lord Flynn."

"Might I escort you to your carriage?" Mark said the words evenly, as if he weren't jockeying into position in front of Flynn.

"Certainly." She smiled brightly as she bid each good night.

The footman held a short-waisted cape for the Baroness. Mark settled it to her shoulders, sniffing at the soft scent of her. Noise filled the foyer as others prepared to leave.

"I am sorry," she whispered again. "I didn't mean to surprise you."

"We can't always avoid each other. Nor would I wish to."

"I didn't realize you would be here, and Diane seemed most determined to find another. We met while I was walking this morning."

"You don't need to explain."

"I do. You can't feel comfortable having me appear at unexpected moments." She squeezed his hand again once she was settled in the carriage. "Until tomorrow," she whispered before he shut the door.

John Coachman shouted and the carriage lurched away, rattling down the street.

She was wrong. He didn't hate the unexpected moments when they ran into each other. He wanted more of them. And openly.

And less of those moments when they had to part.

Obsession came in many forms. His father's gambling. And now this. Mark's own little fixation with the beautiful Katrina.

That all but settled it. He would enjoy their time together tomorrow night and he would depart London for a few days to visit

the family estate. He did not need anything outside of a physical relationship with her. They both needed to catch their breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the past two months, Katrina had known so much joy as a woman, she had nearly forgotten what it was to be a woman cursed. Her flow had started and she lay on the chaise in the corner of her room, with a fire stirred to keep the room as warm as possible.

The first day was the worst, and this one particularly debilitating. Even the gossipy morning paper had done nothing to distract her from the dull ache in her back and deep in her womb. Maybe some powders would help.

Her correspondence lay in a pile on the floor. Irma, her lady's maid had brought it to her an hour ago and Katrina flicked through it with unusual disinterest.

A light tap sounded on her door and Ivan walked in. "Good morning, Mama."

"Ivan."

He bent over her and kissed her forehead. "You didn't come down for breakfast."

"It is nothing of importance. Is Mr. Altman here yet?"

"He was just coming in the servant's entrance when I left the table."

"You will be out from under his thumb soon and off to university. I should hear soon about your acceptance at the university in St. Petersburg."

"Mr. Altman believes I can successfully apply to Oxford."

"Oxford is for Englishmen."

"Have you decided about Scotland yet? Uncle Peter sent me a letter yesterday. He expects us, Mama."

"I have been considering it, but I have another proposal in the interim. What if you and Claud were to spend a week or so with him in Surrey? Doubtless the hunting will be sufficient to satisfy even the most blood-thirsty."

"Sergei will stay home?"

"He is young."

"Mama, we aren't children anymore. I promise I will take care of my brothers."

"It's not that."

"Is it because you do not wish to marry Uncle Peter?"

"He had no right to tell you." Katrina took a deep breath. She would not verbalize her grievances in front of her son, but she

couldn't help feeling animosity that Peter would dare broach the subject with Ivan, thus attempting to gain some emotional support for his cause.

"He said I should know, since I'm the head of the family."

"Ivan, I admired your papa. Peter is nothing like him, and even if he were, I do not need to marry."

"But he would take care of you. You wouldn't have to be alone."

"Is that what he said?"

Ivan nodded.

"In time, I might remarry."

"To some Russian?" he said with some surprising asperity.

"Ivan!" She had never heard him speak disparagingly of his heritage.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I do not like to think of you far away when my family will be raised here with me in England, as Klees."

"That is many years away. Don't worry about it now. Time will set everything right."

"Mama, I am not a child anymore. I am the baron."

"Indeed, you are, and you are wise to think of your future, but guess who is still your mother and always will be?"

"I don't want you to go without us."

"We don't always get what we want, but I do promise not to marry a Russian fisherman, if that makes you feel better."

\* \* \* \* \*

In addition to her physical ailment, she had a heavy heart the rest of the day. She would not, however, miss her time with Mark. She arrived early, intending to use her key, but Duncan, the lone footman, greeted her, took her cloak, fetched a tray and stirred up the fire.

She heard Mark come in about an hour later. He spoke to Duncan and then appeared in the sitting room door. "Katrina?"

She held out her hand. "I've missed you."

"You are not well? Your hand is cold. Duncan said you needed a fire." He took the seat opposite her, while thoroughly examining her.

"Only a womanly concern, but I thought that shouldn't prevent me from pleasuring you."

"You've forgotten I was married. Would you not prefer to be comfortably abed with a book, a bottle warmer and layers of blankets?"

"We have a bed here. Useful for other things besides sleep." She tried to smile, but the dull pain seemed to spread.

"This is a mutual affair, Katrina. It does not always need to be

about bedding.” He tugged at her hand. “Companionship can be just as pleasurable. Come. The pain is in every line of your face.”

“I have lines?”

He chuckled, but held out his hand for her. “Come here.”

She stood, he separated his legs and pulled her into his lap. She wrapped one arm over his chest and nestled close to his side, her head beneath his chin. He gripped her feet, one at a time, and removed her shoes before tucking her stockinged feet beneath his thigh.

“Some mistress I am,” she said.

“You’ll do. I would rather have a tooth extracted than think about selecting another.”

She giggled. “Such a compliment.”

“Are you warm enough?” he asked.

“Yes, sumptuously.” She snuggled a bit closer and she felt his arm cradle her, his hand settling on her hip.

“You were a success at my sister’s dinner party. Lord Flynn seemed especially dazzled.”

“He’s a mere boy,” she said.

“With more teeth than a man should have.”

“He did have a nice smile.”

“Katrina?”

“Hmm?”

“I realize I didn’t mention this when we began our arrangement, but I do expect you to be exclusive to me.”

“You don’t wish to share?”

“I was not feeling particularly humored by last night’s display of panting boys in tight breeches.”

“I am feeling so poorly your protective jealousy is almost humorous. Let me be angry that you are ordering me about on another day.”

“It wasn’t an order.”

“You will be happy to know I didn’t notice the tightness of their breeches.”

“Well. That is good then.”

“I did, however, rub my hand along Lord Flynn’s firm thigh. Perhaps that accounted for his marked attention.”

“You wish to aggravate me, I see?”

“I would not be a woman if I did not.”

He *hmpf*ed but said nothing further.

“What did you think of your sisters’ selection of potential wives?”

“Were their motives so transparent? Of course, they were. There

was not an original among them.”

“I would have made a different choice for you.”

“Gad, more matchmaking?”

“As I know you so well, I believe I could make a short list, saving you time *and* aggravation.”

“Then you should let my sisters know so you are not doubling up on your efforts.”

“I am going to think about it. We shall have you married by the end of the next season.”

“There’s no need to rush. And you are sounding rather chipper about the prospect of tying me down.”

“If we find the right woman, she will let you tie her down.” Katrina curled in closer and he settled his big, warm hand at the small of her back.

He laughed. “Until then, I did bring you a gift.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small box. “It’s an Angerstein. I hear they are rare.”

“Oh, Mark. Another piece of jewelry?”

“Yes. Tell me what you think.” She tore at the box while he continued. “It’s become something of a scavenger hunt. The jeweler says the work is some of the finest he’s ever seen. And I don’t mind obtaining baubles for a woman who can display them so well.”

“Oh, it’s lovely.” Katrina pulled the silver ring out and twisted it in the light.

“No gems.”

“The work needs no adornment. It’s so delicate.” She tried it on her fourth finger but it was too big. It slid perfectly onto her third and covered her finger to near her knuckle.

Mark took her hand and kissed it. “As I suspected, perfect.”

## Chapter Five

A week in the country did nothing more than frustrate him, even though the riding and hunting were superb at his friend's Herefordshire estate. He nabbed six brace of pheasant hens, young and plump, and they were prepared for an evening meal to the delight of his hosts. He might have enjoyed the pheasant more if Katrina had accompanied him on the trip he'd taken to avoid her.

Why the hell should he deny himself the pleasure of his mistress? Well, lesson learned. He would be a willing slave to his cock until such time as a marriage subdued his desires. Had he stayed, he wouldn't have had access to her in the traditional sense, but her not-so-subtle offers of fellatio shouldn't have been ignored.

He was glad to be home.

Pacing across the hardwood floor, Mark listened for any sound of the carriage, the clop of hooves and the turning wheels, signaling that she approached. A renewed pang of desire and need coursed through him, stronger than anything he'd felt for any other woman.

She arrived on time, all regal elegance. Dressing in such a fashion was unnecessary; he planned to strip off her clothing within moments of her arrival. He met her in the foyer, alone.

"Mark, how was your trip?" Her smile was radiant, as if he hadn't seen the sun since he'd been gone.

"Dull. The smell of stock blowing in the wind. Broken fences. Some hunting. But fresh bread, plenty of game, excellent cheese and fresh eggs every morning."

"As opposed to the stench of burning coal and unwashed humanity we have here in London?"

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close, lifting her a bit. "Stop, you are exciting me."

"Oh?"

"Your lips were moving."

"Then, indeed, you'd better stop me."

The kiss was pleasurable and warmed him thoroughly. Her hands were securely gripped to his lapel. "And were you a good girl while I was gone?"

"Nothing but balls and gossip."

"You didn't yearn for me?"

"Parts of you," she said. Her hand slid downward and cupped his erection. "And it seems you've missed me."

Somehow they made it up the staircase and into their room, losing bits of their clothing along the way. When they were naked, they fell into the bed, limbs tangled and mouths together. And laughing.

Her thigh was smooth and warm under the stroking of his hand.

“Do hurry,” she whispered. “I’m more than ready.”

She wrapped her legs about his waist. His cock knew the way home. Yes, she was ready—wet and slick and hot like the sun. He slipped into her, sighing with relief. If there was one place a man belonged...

Her hands soothed down his back, tracing along his spine and then caressing over his ass.

He set a rhythm, his hips canting with slow in-and-out movements. He leaned toward his left, braced on his elbow, and used his right hand to brush away the tendrils of hair on her face and then pressed kisses on her forehead, her cheeks and her ears.

She smiled as she stared up at him.

“You look happy,” he said.

“Who wouldn’t be in my place?”

He laughed lightly, but thought of the one woman who should have been happy in her place and never seemed to be. Susannah.

Why should he dwell on the past when Katrina’s lips were so close? He bent to kiss her, to taste of her giving nature and natural allure. She entwined her arms about his neck, her fingers flicked through his hair and her mouth welcomed him.

There wasn’t the demanding, headlong rush to completion they had experience before. Tonight was better. Her taste sweeter. Her violet-colored eyes deeper and full of sexual longing.

Their tongues touched and retreated. Their lips met and lingered. His hand searched up her side, finding and kneading her breast. His thumb brushed over her distended nipple.

She turned her face away and moaned beneath the slow assault. Her cheeks were pink. Her lips glistened where her tongue brushed slowly. Her lashes fanned, dark and thick.

Jewels and gowns and sunlight did not adequately capture her beauty.

He’d always thought she was one of the most beautiful women in London. Now he knew it. In the heated, uninhibited throes of passion, Katrina was at her best.

Giving. Enthusiastic. Curious. And yet so unpretentiously her. Was it because she was Russian? Or was it because she was not English? While she was all things proper, she was also daring and willing.

Not once had he gotten the feeling she only did it to please him—

that it was her duty. There was no doubt in his mind she *did* do it to please him, but she was equally determined she would find satisfaction and satiation on her own, *diletto* notwithstanding.

She was going to ruin him for marriage.

Her fingers had crept down his back and teased along the crevasse of his ass. "You feel wonderful," she said.

"My ass?"

"That...and your cock." She gazed at him, humor lighting her eyes. "Do you wish me to compliment your size?"

"It never hurts." He shoved deep, and her eyes popped wider while her smile grew fiendish.

"You have the most glorious cock. Long. Hard. I feel full of you. Overflowing." She was still smiling.

"You'll think it's long and hard when I have it in your ass."

Her nostrils flared and her smile disappeared. "I want you to do that to me now."

"Katrina." He hadn't really meant to say such a thing, and it almost sounded brutal the way he had uttered it. He knew their sexual exploration would eventually lead them to darker activities. He had teased, but he had seen she had not performed such activities before.

"Yes," she said, nodding in determination.

He felt a surge of pleasure through his body, and his cock surged in anticipation.

"Soon." Mark was surprised at his reticence. Was he wrong to want to draw out the peaks and valleys of their exploration? Was he wrong to want to explore forbidden pleasure with a willing woman? To make it last as long as possible before he gave in to the realities of staid sexual congress found inside the marriage bed?

"And everything else?"

"Everything I know." He pushed into her again, wanting this night to be just about them and not adventure or dissipation. He just wanted to be in her arms to enjoy the peace and comfort of companionship.

She smiled again. "I love how you do that. Don't ever stop."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I have a surprise for you," Katrina said once they were both replete with sexual satisfaction. Mark was reclined on his back, while pillows braced him up slightly. She was wrapped about him, her arm over his chest and her leg over his loins. For a change, a light blanket covered them.

"If it involves my cock moving in the next hour, you'd better wait."



"No, but something I hope will make you happy, and I do owe you some time." She couldn't wait to tell him. She pushed up beside him, smiling widely. "No, you'll never guess. Don't even try. My sons will be visiting their uncle for five days."

"And you are in favor of such an arrangement with him?"

She sighed. "It's a compromise of sorts, but I don't want to bother you with my family's problems or the excruciating details of negotiating said compromise."

"You can tell me," he said. She tilted her head to examine him. Was he really interested in knowing the tedious details of her family life?

"Peter wants to take them to Scotland in September. I cannot agree to such an extensive trip without me, so I thought to see how they would do on a shorter, less arduous trip to Surrey. I had thought to keep Sergei, my youngest, home with me, but Peter took to the idea and insisted they all come. I think they are looking forward to the trip," she finished. Peevishness coursed through her at the renewed discussion. Peter had leveraged this trip and still might get to take the children to Scotland.

"And you are worried?"

"Maybe I'm being too motherly. I don't mean to restrict them, but... No. I am happy about this. Peter has compromised and so have I, difficult as that was. That is what I am telling myself."

"It seems a reasonable step if they are not used to being away. Put it from your mind. Who better to watch over them than an uncle? They will return with boisterous tales of heroics and you'll find your boys took another step toward manhood."

"Oh, you are so logical and yet I don't want them to grow up. Why could you not agree with me?" She tapped her finger against his chin.

He laughed. "Because then you would get used to the idea that I'm agreeable, and we can't have that. So, what is your surprise?"

"Don't you see? Three boys in the country for a few days." She braced her elbows on his chest and then set her chin to hands. "You. Me. No one to whom we must answer."

"Why, Baroness, that sounds like a planned seduction."

"What do you think? Five days. Alone?" She wagged her brows. "Unbridled passion?"

"And when is this rare opportunity to occur?"

"They are leaving next Friday."

"Then we shall make plans accordingly."

She squealed. "Oh, Mark! It will be delightful. I will not have to

sneak away in the middle of the night or worry I'll be discovered. We can frolic for hours at a time." She lowered her voice. "I will be at your beck and call."

"Now, don't you feel better about abandoning your children?"

"Abandoning?" She reached for his nipple and pinched him.

Mark gasped and arched upward at the sudden contact. He gripped her wrist but didn't make her stop. He didn't say anything either, but the burning heat in his gaze told her his need was sexual, not that he was pained by the sudden tweaking.

She moved slightly, her leg already positioned over him, covering him and feeling he was rock hard between her thighs. She twisted her arm and he let go of her hand. In turn, she gripped his wrists and pushed his hands to the bed.

She rocked forward, feeling the tip of his cock slid into place. She lunged backward, taking him deep in one hard surge.

With another push of his wrists, she ordered, "Don't move."

His eyelids lowered. When she set her index finger to the tip of his little pebbled nipple, she watched with satisfaction as he took a deep breath. Katrina tortured him with slow circles before she bent and set her mouth over the excited disk. She sucked the hard nub into her mouth, pressing it between her lips while she used her tongue to rub the tip.

His jaw clenched.

She made it worse when she pinched his free nipple, twisting and turning as she rolled it between her fingers. He bucked up between her legs, his cock ramming into her, but he didn't move his hands.

Katrina licked him before sitting up, but kept both of her hands teasing at his chest.

He glared at her. She wasn't going to stop the sexual torment. She had not known Mark was susceptible to such stimulation, or that men could be. Why were women kept so ignorant of sensual delights? Or was it just her, with no one to tell her the secrets that could make successful marriages? And affairs.

Rocking over him, she took him in great, penetrating slides downward and teasing, clenching slides upward.

He disobeyed her then, pushing her hands away. "I'll release too quickly."

"I don't care." She grabbed him again, forcing his arms downward. He could have stopped her, but she didn't think he really wanted to.

She rocked faster, her fingers playing mercilessly, while her thighs burned. He had closed his eyes and everything about him suggested he

was losing control—the heaving chest and clenched jaw, and the way he arched his back, practically bucking beneath her. He was doing nothing but indulging in the pleasure she was giving him.

When his hands gripped her knees, he heaved, groaning, lifting her and finally turning her to her back before he shoved hard, releasing in the agony of uncontrollable sexual gratification.

At her hands.

She liked the sound of a man with little control, especially the way Mark seemed to be putty in her hands.

Katrina wasn't sure what was better—to know she was with a man who could pleasure her or to know she could bring a man to his knees.

Either way, she thought as she snuggled next to him, she had never been this content: with a man, with the looming change for her children, with life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Katrina saw the children off at ten o'clock in the morning, fighting back a wave of tears. They had never been parted for such a length of time.

"It is only five days, Mama," Ivan said. He had grown up this spring and seemed more than ready to break from her influence. All mothers had to let their little birds fly from the nest eventually. Maybe that was the hallmark of successful child rearing—the children taking flight without her help.

"Take special care with Sergei," she reminded.

"I promise, he will only come back dirty," Ivan said before kissing her cheek. Sergei looked out the window and waved. Claud ignored her.

By eleven, Katrina had forgotten she had children.

Mark's unmarked carriage arrived, in which his traveling footman stashed her valise, a hatbox and a wicker basket containing food and wine. Mark had only told her they were traveling for a good distance, but he had not said where they were going.

No lady's maid. No valet. They would be living on sexual satisfaction, feeding each other with the velvety touch of hands and fingers and other bodily instruments and drinking from the elixir of her honeypot.

"Henley-on-Thames," he said when he'd settled himself in the carriage. "I have a friend who agreed to let us stay at his home, since he is in Brussels with a commission to paint their royals."

"We must have a drink to celebrate our freedom," she said. She plucked the bottle from the wicker basket at her feet and handed it to Mark.

“A Madeira.”

“Only the best from your mistress.” She scooted close and ran her hand across his shoulder.

She couldn't help but kiss him. He was dressed in tan breeches and a navy cutaway jacket with white linen. He had forgone the traditional black cravat, though she saw that his hat, which was tossed on the seat across from them, was still adorned with a black band, a traditional mourning marker.

He worked at the bottle and popped the cork. The glasses were filled quickly.

“A toast?” he asked.

“I'm woefully inadequate at Irish witticisms.”

He raised his glass. “Let's see. ‘Here's to a woman's kisses, and to whiskey, amber clear; not as sweet as a woman's kiss but a darn sight more sincere.’ You asked for Irish.”

She laughed. “You could have stopped at a woman's kisses and I would have thought you wonderfully romantic.”

He raised his glass again. “Here's to a woman's kisses.”

“Oh, I must toast us in Russian then.” She lifted her glass and spoke in her native tongue, something she had not done with regularity for many months. “And the translation is, ‘Let the tables break from abundance, and the beds break from love.’”

“A worthy toast.”

Mark finished his glass while she still sipped at hers. “No tears this morning?”

“A few. I tried to be strong, but there was Sergei, hanging out the carriage window, waving as if he would never see his mama again. And Ivan. It was if I don't know the boy anymore. He is ready to take charge, embrace the world. His father would be proud. His mother is showing herself to be weak and sentimental. And my middle son is as nonchalant about life as anyone I know.”

“I am sure you are a good mother, but you must change along with them as they mature.”

“Did your wisdom come from being an older brother to all your sisters?”

“Perhaps. Or maybe it was because of the recent musings I've had about being a father.”

“Your day will come. We will find you a woman with sturdy hips, and you will seed a dynasty.”

He chuckled, but she heard the rueful nature in its tone. “I would settle for an heir and a spare.” His brow furrowed a bit, contemplating some weighty matter. She reached for his glass and poured him more

wine.

"So how is your marriage list progressing?" he asked as she handed him a second glass.

"There are a few worthy candidates, in spite of your assertion that they are too young."

"One name is sufficient, just make it the right one."

"I agree with your sister's selection of Miss Albert. The daughter of a marquess. Hips. Family fertility. And she is very lovely. With straight teeth."

"She's a bluestocking," he said with slight mocking—and more of a tease toward her thoughtful analysis. But Katrina suspected, at present, no woman was interesting enough, wealthy enough or trustworthy enough to tempt him into marriage so soon.

"Is intelligence such an unattractive trait? I've always thought intelligence a superior attribute, especially for women."

"It is, unless that is the singular focus, but it should be balanced with other behaviors that define womanhood."

"Such as?"

"If I give you a list, you will find such a woman, present her on a platter and say, 'Ah, here she is.' I will then be suitably impressed but will utterly reject her, because she will be missing a certain something that appeals to me here, a certain *je ne sais quoi*," he said, touching the center of his chest, "but which cannot be named. I'm not sure you can be unbiased in this search. And really, selecting a wife is nothing more than a gamble. She might be the most proper, well-endowed and well-dowered female to have been born, but that doesn't guarantee compatibility or desirability."

"You have no faith."

"So, you are saying your first husband was the perfect man for you?"

"I am saying we were well matched. As you would be with Miss Albert."

"No. If you and my sisters insist on continuing this search, Miss Albert should be scratched from your list. I looked at her once. And with the second look I was convinced with great surety that she is not the one."

"Oh, I have other names, but I think I would like to wait until the end of the season before making recommendations."

"They'll all be married off by then."

"Not necessarily. Men tend to think they must snap up the first pearl to come along when, if they would practice patience..."

"They would get a wife with a bigger dowry."

She laughed. "If they were patient, they would find a true diamond and not a rough imitation. Not a faux pearl."

"That's what the dowry is for, to cover up the roughness of those diamonds."

"Goodness, such a skeptic. How did you find a wife the first time?"

"I ask myself this all the time."

She laughed again. "Were you infatuated? Stars in your eyes?" She embraced his hand. Comfort came in odd ways, she knew. And what better way for a mistress to comfort than offer solace for the heart.

"Susannah was...what I needed at the time."

"Then she was the best choice of all. She came to a few of my balls before your marriage. I thought she was lovely. Now, I insist upon hearing your list of qualities. Go on, name five of them. So, unintelligent is first on your list," she said, laughing still.

"I never said that. All right, thoughtful intelligence, not just factually smart." He raised his gaze to the ceiling of the carriage roof. "Witty humor, dynamically unique, unflagging trustworthiness and compassionate morality."

"Hm, I think you cheated. That is nearly ten different characteristics wrapped up in clever wording. And you didn't mention love."

"That was number six. Honest, soul-deep, kindred-spirit love."

"A virtuous paragon, indeed," she said. Katrina couldn't read his soft gaze. Were they talking about one impossible vision of womanhood? Or was he telling her that she had none of those qualities?

He talked more and she listened, finally taking his glass when he'd finished the last of his Madeira, about the same time as their conversation came to an end, coming back to the topic of his wife, Susannah. "It was heart-breaking, and makes it so difficult to even think of another wife."

"You are not alone in your grief," she said, settling next to him her arm about his chest.

"But I am alone in my regret, and strangely, they feel the same."

\* \* \* \* \*

The manor house was on a small estate nestled along the upper bank of the Thames with large oak trees, a horse barn and manicured greens. Only four servants kept up the seven-bedroom home. A large gazebo was perched below, closer to the waters, with cushioned chairs and a rock fireplace—perfect for cool English nights.

As for the river, there was a sturdy dock held in place with huge round poles where dories and rowboats could be launched with ease.

Mark was pleased it offered peace and privacy, along with some special enchantments enjoyed by his friend, Lord Le Carre. This was no everyday house in the country, but one suited for a single man with singular tastes—one who enjoyed the country and thoroughly enjoyed a continual string of mistresses and odd friends.

Katrina wanted to learn and he was in just the peculiar mood to instruct her. His cock had been in a tumescent state for most of the trip as the pleasurable idea of fucking Lady Klee from sunrise to sunrise was foremost in his mind.

While he was ready to explore her, she had her own ideas.

Katrina had to examine everything and was off with the housekeeper while he enjoyed a drink before dinner, which was to be served in an hour. Would the housekeeper show her *every* room? He doubted it, though the servants must know the home was special and tailor-made for less than innocent rendezvous.

A distinct line existed for him—the line between sexual gratification and affectionate companionship. One served by a man's mistress, the other by his wife and mother of his children. He was not sure if Katrina saw that line; she seemed to blend the two seamlessly.

She had been content to think her dutiful marriage was the core of her happiness as a woman. Maybe that was what most people told themselves—was it just easier to lie to oneself than admit to a mistake, or acknowledge a painful unhappiness?

What did the French say? "In love, there is one who kisses and one who offers the cheek?" Katrina had been rather secure in her well-matched marriage arrangement, not passionate but certainly without a painful lack of harmony. If he had to guess, her husband had probably been dotty for her, which undoubtedly accounted for her idealistic tendency toward happily-ever-after.

Why should he think Katrina would be different from other women? His sisters were just as silly for their husbands. Were Susannah's feelings ever such for him? Honestly, he didn't know. But shouldn't a man know if his wife held him in both esteem and love? And if she did, wouldn't there be a reciprocal exchange of physical intimacies?

Perhaps not the intensity one experienced with a mistress.

Bah, it was all an idealistic dream...*a wife interested in intercourse?*

What he did know was that the question of his next wife was one he was not interested in at present. He had a mistress. He had several more months of mourning.

And he was not waiting to be struck by lightning.

When Katrina arrived for supper, once again dressed with immaculate care, she greeted him with warm enthusiasm. The buttons down the front of her dress shimmered like diamonds. Easily accessible. Easily undone.

She saw her plate at the far end of the table, plucked it up and returned to sit beside him. Once she was seated, she placed her hand over his and squeezed, jerking her hand away when she saw the servant was ready to serve her food.

"It's perfect, Mark. I could spend the whole summer here."

"But you'd miss much of the season." He refrained from mentioning her children, intent on maintaining her sanguinity.

"Does not the sameness of yearly balls and Bach musicals and marriage plotting frighten you sometime?"

"Sameness implies stability and safety, and most cannot see beyond those basic needs," he answered.

"So, we must listen one year to Bach's chorales and the next year to his concertos?"

"Or you must learn to play your own instrument."

"That is very astute of you."

Katrina gazed at him, before glancing toward the footman as he left the room. Bright violet passion lit her eyes. Her hand, under the table, caressed his thigh. "Do you know it is Friday? That I've ridden in a carriage with you all day, maintaining the utmost in decorum when all I have been thinking about is what we might do together if we but had a bed? This fare will wait. I don't think I can."

He threw his linen napkin to the table. "I've been waiting for such an invitation all day, Baroness."

He had noticed her calm demeanor but had attributed it to the journey and her separation from her children. He had been with enough woman to know all did not welcome a man's advances much of the time, especially not when they had been bounced to jelly on a long trip by carriage.

Katrina continued to surprise him, but he always arrived back to one conclusion. He paid her to be available. There was an additional benefit with Katrina—her entertaining bursts of forwardness. More than any other woman he had known, she was also willing to ask for what she wanted sexually.

Worth its weight in gold and silver and not something to take for granted.

Their room was up a short flight of wooden stairs. She bunched her skirts and hurried after the servant leading them, glancing back at Mark as she entered their room.



After the servant departed, he closed the door and leaned against the wooden panel, enjoying her exuberance as she took in the new surroundings. A magnificent marble fireplace faced the large Jacobean poster bed with blue plush velvet curtains hanging in place.

"Once we have shed our clothes, we should leave them off. It would save us so much time," she said.

"That might make it difficult to ride in the morning."

"My lord? It is a perfect time to ride." She grinned impishly before working at the ties and buttons on her dress.

"Amongst other things."

"Yes. And you must teach me everything. When we part, I must be as equally entertaining for my next lover."

"Your next lover?"

He pushed away from the door and strolled toward her, before batting her hands away and popping the shiny buttons of her dress. "Your next lover?" he said again. "And who might that be?"

She laughed. "A marquess, perhaps. A duke?"

"Another duke? Are they so impressive?"

"Or the Prince of Wales."

He separated the material, pushing the sleeves down, exposing the unblemished skin of her shoulders. He soothed his hands over her them and then kissed below her ear.

"You are dreaming of another man already?" he asked.

She laughed again and flung her arms about his neck. She had her eyes closed, as if she were imagining the possibilities. "I shall be the most sought after, the most desired mistress in all of London. I will be a perfect snob, eschewing the unworthy, disdaining all except the most interesting, the richest and the most handsome of suitors."

"And they will lay gold at your feet?" he asked. He worked at the falls of his trousers. His anger made desire burn hotter, but she did not see the set of his jaw or the fury he felt burn in his gaze. He did not bring her to the privacy of a country home to have her dream of her future lovers.

"I will let them. The more gold the better. Mounds of coins and jewels and furs. All for me."

"Then I'd better get a last fuck before I can't afford you anymore."

She was still smiling when he pushed her on to the bed and hoisted up her skirts. Her daydreamy silliness might have played better to a man who didn't care what his woman did, but he was not one of them. She could show him some...

He gripped the root of his cock, leaned over her and shoved hard. For the first time since he had known her, he did not care about her

pleasure. He braced his arms firmly beside her shoulders. He pumped into her, telling himself he purchased nothing more than quim and that entitled him to complete access—mind and body.

He did not look at her.

While he pounded into her, grunting over her like an animal, his body relished the pure gratification. His mind already condemned him for overreacting.

Release was pleasurable but not complete. There was no satisfaction past the end of his cock.

He withdrew and pushed from the bed, stuffing his cock into his breeches and buttoning up. She lay unmoving, her face turned away from him. Her hands were fisted at her sides.

“If that is how you need to obtain pleasure, that is fine. You paid me for such access. But if you intend to punish me for innocent teasing or for some imagined slight—”

“You did nothing wrong.”

She pushed out of the bed and into her robe, slowly fastening the ties. Mark found a chair and dropped into the cushions. The room was too small and he was too small-minded. He had tried being away from her to settle the agonizing jealousy that plagued him. He could bed any number of women or whores. He had done so in the past.

He had never had this intense sexual longing as he did with Katrina. Was this how opium addicts craved their drug?

Maybe it was a mistake to be alone with her for an extended period.

But was it any better to see her every few days? His cock pained him mercilessly just imagining the rutting pleasure they could have. And his soul ached thinking about life without her.

He could hear her movements around the room, but she said nothing. He had nothing to offer but an apology, which he would invariably say incorrectly.

Finally, her hand touched the back of his head, followed by a kiss near his forehead.

“I know you were teasing, but I do not like to think of you with other men.” He barely got the words past the clench of his teeth.

“Mark, someday we will part. You will marry and I will return to Russia with my sons. Who knows what will happen after? This is all temporary, but it is glorious and fun and fulfilling. Let us enjoy each other until then. Know that my loyalty is with you. Know that I wish to be free with you, mocking that which is held dear by the *ton*. Searching for what is forbidden and delectable. Looking for the last crumb of delight, even if it's just imagining something so sinful as another lover.

"I also need you to know my husband was similarly jealous, so it is no surprise you would be affected. But it is unfair to be punished because you misunderstood me."

"I am not jealous. Not really. I am a fool, though." He gripped her hand, turned it and kissed her palm. "Forgive me."

He wasn't jealous, he was temporarily insane, driven there by an insatiable need to possess Katrina. And a bit of regret that what she said was true—there would come a day when she would belong to someone else—some cold Russian merchant who would use her...just as he had.

He tugged and pulled her to his lap. Her robe was silky, and he caressed the skin beneath the sheer covering and he felt the warmth of her hip.

"He was a good man, but I could never speak to or flirt with other men. I learned early on what upset him, and after that I behaved with frigid decorum. Let me rejoice in this with you. Let me be me. I would so enjoy that."

"I don't want you to change," he said.

Katrina cupped his face, her thumb brushing softly over his lips. "But I am changing. I am free for the first time. Yes, this is all new to me. Geral wasn't my lover. You are my first, and I don't want to be burdened by guilt or fear. Put your confidence in me that I am *your* mistress. No one else tempts me."

In the society they lived, he understood why a widow looked to powerful men for protection. And for all accounts, the Duke of Melrose was respectable; a fine man to offer friendship to Katrina. "So, I should apologize a second time?"

"Grovel this time. Along with anything else I might require. On your knees, sir."

"You are a demanding mistress."

"But one who can be very generous in return."

"I *am* sorry." He brushed his lips against hers. My God, she was sweet. "While I have you, God help me, I want you all to myself."

"Are we not at least friends after these past weeks? And cannot friends tease each other?"

"Imagining you with other men is not a teasing matter, friend."

She smiled at his word choice. The idea of maintaining a friendship with a mistress was humorous. He paid her money—that made it a business relationship only.

But he had told her, in tentative forays, some very private things. Yes, they were becoming friends.

"Put it from your mind." She ran her hands through his hair and

held his face steady while she gazed into his eyes. "Let us finish our supper and see where the night takes us."

She squirmed from his lap, but he gripped her wrist and held her. He dared look up at her then, feeling the need to confess.

"I am not a completely honorable man."

"We make mistakes. We change. I do not find you dishonorable."

"We don't really change, Katrina. Did he mistreat you?"

"Did *you* mistreat me?" Her statement was bayonet-sharp.

"I meant Samuel."

"I know. You aren't like him."

He toyed with her fingers. "Tell me." His mind rejected things like her being with other men. Like other men mistreating her. Yet she was his mistress and he was doing those same things that caused his stomach to revolt in the thinking of such an atrocity.

"Another night perhaps."

Mark pushed to his feet and wrapped his arms about her waist. "Forget about supper. Lay with me."

She shrugged, the silken rail slid down her arms, then she turned toward the bed. Seeing her bare flesh was a special agony, as though he was made to view her perfection in only this way and to cover even an inch of her flesh was criminal. He watched as she drew back the covers and lay in the middle. She patted the pillow in invitation.

He undressed, staring at her as he worked from his cravat down to his boots. He lay beside her, his trousers still on.

"I expected ravishment, not a baring of our souls," she said.

"My soul isn't worth seeing."

She curled next to him, her face against his chest, her favorite resting place when they were not engaged.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"If I held an unforgiveness in my heart each time I was wronged, I would be a bitter, cold hag. We are each given a certain number of years. I cannot see wasting my time feeling anything less than contentment," she said.

Her teasing could stir raging turmoil in him, and then with a few words, calm the raging beast. He stroked his fingers through her hair. Contentment might be found with a good book on a rainy day, but delectable Katrina satisfied in ways he'd never dreamed.

## Chapter Six

The place between sleep and awake was just dreamy enough to feel as if it would go on forever, and just real enough for Katrina to know that when Mark Turnbow was between her legs, pleasuring her, she needed to be awake for every moment.

Her knees were bent. She could see Mark's dark hair and feel the gentle lap of his tongue over the tingling bud between her thighs.

Sleepy bonelessness prevented her from doing anything but spreading her legs farther and moaning with each tender caress.

This was reason enough to want to wake up with a man each morning for the rest of her life. A man just like Mark.

She opened her eyes as the thought doused her into alertness. She had no aspirations about her place in Mark's life. None. And she would keep it that way. When a man made it clear he wanted a mistress, he was also giving notice he did not want a wife, emotional attachments or attendant responsibilities.

Only a grey area existed between—that of friendship.

It was all she could offer. She wasn't sure he wanted even that.

His hands were gentle, pressing at her thighs and opening the pink folds. Each clutch of her legs brought equal force from Mark, keeping her exposed and vulnerable. If it was a battle of pleasure, she would allow him to win. To hurry was to deprive herself.

But to wait was an indescribable torment, one Mark had perfected as his meticulous attention made her shudder. When he sucked the swollen bud between her legs, Katrina moaned, but found no relief even as his tongue rasped over and over the sensitive tip.

She ran her fingers through his hair and held his head, keeping him close, encouraging him to continue.

Release was never sweet, the yearning never easily satisfied. Only the contentment afterward was.

Release was a high mountain and a dangerous cliff. A soaring hawk and a burst of wind beneath its wings. The gentleness gave way to desperate need and the desire to lose herself.

She gasped, the final ascent unbearable with sharp pleasure. Her body writhed at the torment, arching while her legs clasped together.

When she opened her eyes, Mark stared down at her.

"Is it wanton of me to want everything you can give? And I never want you to stop," she said, breathless from the effort.

"Misdirected, maybe, but not wanton. I doubt I even know all of those mysteries to which you allude. But I know who does know.

Come.” He was mostly dressed; she was not, but she reached for his hand. “Lord Le Carre has a library I think you might enjoy.”

She reached for her rail. He stayed her hand. “As you are.”

“But—”

“The staff is used to Lord Le Carre’s activities. A naked woman is not going to shock them. And if it is as you say, we’ll just let this be part of your learning.”

“I can’t do that.” She reached again for her rail.

He faced her, his expression blank. “Since you are my mistress, how would you feel if I commanded you to remain naked? For the remainder of our time together?”

She felt a hard knot in her throat, and a decided excitement between her legs. “I don’t know. Would you want such a thing?”

“I’m asking you.”

“I think I would feel uncomfortable around other people, especially servants.”

“But with me?”

“If it is what you wanted.”

“But how does it make you feel? For me to command it?”

“Scared.”

“Nothing else?” He touched her forehead. “What about here?”

“Angry you would present it as an order.”

He touched her heart. “And here?”

“Intrigued you would want it. Curious as to why it would make you happy. And wondering what else you might wish from me.”

“And here.” He touched her mons, lightly and unthreateningly.

“Excited. Aroused. And still scared it would be so. Is it what you want?”

“You were curious. I was merely presenting a way for you to experience your curiosity.” He reached for her rail and held it while she slipped her arms in the silky sleeves.

Now she was curious. He opened the door for her while she still tied her belt and pushed her feet into her slippers. “People enjoy that? Being commanded?”

“Some.”

“And you?”

“I’ve never practiced it, per se,” he said.

“Oh, you have my attention, Lord Compton. What else have you practiced?”

He chuckled. “I don’t believe I am prepared to tell you of my past sexual exploits.”

“Would I be shocked?”

“A picture is worth a thousand words, Baroness.”

He held her hand in an unconventional way, his fingers entwined with hers, as he led her down the stairs. When they walked into the room, Katrina was disappointed. It really was a library.

“Have you ever met Lord Le Carre?” Mark asked.

“Yes, but he never seemed interested in discourse. He seemed to live in another realm.”

“Soon you’ll understand why.”

“Now I am *curiouser*.” she said.

“Did you know he is an artist? Acclaimed might be an exaggeration, only because it is so specific, but what he does is excellent. He’s currently in Brussels painting nudes for the monarchs.”

“Really?”

“But he has another specialty.” He walked to the shelf and pulled away a large book bound in red leather, opening it and glancing through the pages. “He brings stories to life.”

She reached for the book. “I don’t understand. He works in the theatre?”

“A private theatre, yes. With special entertainments.”

“I think what you are about to tell me isn’t fit for a lady’s ears. Or her eyes.”

“A lady, no. My mistress? She might be shocked, but she seems like an inquisitive woman who might be motivated by such sights.”

She gripped her robe tightly about her, fortifying herself. “I am ready.”

“Are you?” He handed her the well-worn book, the leather smooth to the touch. She accepted it and found a chair. Mark leaned against the bookshelf, his shoulder braced against a wooden bracket.

“I’m not going to be shocked,” she said.

“Yes, you will,” he said, holding back a wicked smile. She settled, tucking her legs beneath her, and held the book in her lap.

“I should tell you the stories are played out in real life first and then Le Carre sets them to paper for the participants.”

“Anything else?”

“Would you like a drink?” His brows winged up in a curious but knowing expression.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“And he enjoys adapting fairy tales.”

She was still looking at him when she opened the book. He shrugged. “I’ve warned you. Don’t blame me when your tail is singed,

kitten.”

Her first look took her breath away.

She wouldn't acknowledge her astonishment, but she suspected the red heat that suffused her face would give her away. Each page brought a new breathlessness.

“A fairy tale,” she muttered.

“Snow White, I think. One of his favorite themes. Damsels in distress. Well, his second favorite theme, after poking fun at the Beau Monde and the political set.”

“She appears to be in more distress than the original tale. The lyrics are entertaining. And an interesting concept. But what are these? Not, dwarves surely. They are...using her?”

“I'm sure it is with her consent.” Mark came behind her and stood, observing, probably curious about her reaction. “But look at them. Do they not remind you of certain important political figures?”

She gasped at the recognition. “The King? With those appendages and feet? Almost like an ogre. If I had that sort of man pawing at me, I believe I would eat the apple. Happily.”

“What troubles you?”

“It all looks rather uncaring.”

She turned back a few pages. “So, these were drawn from real people?”

“Look again, you might recognize a few more of them. Believe it or not, there are those who enjoy such escapades. And probably have some version of the story in their possession.”

“Does Le Carre do it to mock? If he did this in Russia, he would enjoy a very short life.” She *hmpf*ed and turned another page. “Three men? I'm having trouble entertaining one.”

“What about the bindings? Or the lash?”

She shrugged, unable or unwilling to answer. “There are more of these books?”

“The themes are much the same. Bondage. Titillation. Submission. Ménage.”

She glanced at him. He seemed unmoved and unaffected as he talked of things well beyond her experience. He watched her closely, as if he could discern her desire and need.

“That this activity even has a name...” Katrina closed the book. “May I see another?”

He pulled the next from the shelf, a tome in much the same style. “Robin Hood,” he said.

She couldn't help but laugh as she flipped through the pages. “Now I know why they were called the Merry Men, but *Maid* Marian



seems anything but. ‘Robin, your arrow doth pierceth the smallest cleft.’ And this one, ‘Cupid’s arrow must always fly to Venus’s mark.’ As a literary work, it leaves much to be desired.”

After a few more pages, she closed the book. He still hadn’t moved.

“You wanted me to see these. Why?”

“There are things I can’t explain.”

“But you could have shown me.”

“Would you like a demonstration?”

She laughed nervously and set the book aside. What she felt had no words. There was an intellectual demand that reasoned it was all unnecessary. And wrong. “If you are doing the demonstrating.”

“It would be more of a joint effort.”

“Mark.” Just his name. She trembled at the thought of such deviations. Could she? Did she really want to?

“It’s only entertainment,” he said, though his voice was husky with need.

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Or not.”

She swallowed back her initial reaction to say no. This was Mark asking. Her lover. Hadn’t she said she wanted to learn everything? But more than that she wanted to please him. “Where do we start?”

\* \* \* \* \*

They barely spoke as they’d walked back to their shared room. She still carried the Robin Hood book with its awful narrative and peculiar drawings. Once inside, she set the book aside, intending to read it later.

The smell of lavender was sweet in the air, carried on the wings of the light wind entering the room through the open windows. Or was it the leftover scent from their lovemaking? Katrina focused on the sound of chirping birds flitting outdoors from one branch to another and waited for Mark’s instructions.

Something had changed between her and Mark. They were no longer enjoying just a few pleasurable interludes when they had time.

Their exploration had turned from happy lightness to disturbing darkness. Their curiosity was no longer playful, but serious. They’d had silently agreed to pursue this strange quest for sexual gratification—together.

Katrina wasn’t sure this was what she wanted from Mark, but she was just inquisitive enough to explore the possibilities. The shift was palpable, even her heart had taken to thumping as if it wished to

escape her body.

Mark walked to a locked cabinet and twisted the key. He collected a few implements and dropped them in the mess of coverings on the bed.

He swept her rail away, allowing it to fall to the floor. His nostrils flared as he grabbed her and pulled her hard against him. "You'll do as I say."

She felt a violent reaction to his demand. It was a command, not a request.

"On the bed," he demanded.

The bed was still unmade, the covers heaped in messy lumps. She found her place and pulled a light cover over her body.

"No." He tore it back, exposing her fully. He lifted one of her legs, bending it, and opening her wide. There was a certain thrill, she couldn't deny it. There was also a distaste that surprised her. And a fear that speared through her chest as if she walked alone on a dark night.

The toys were nearby and Mark lifted one, thick and dangerous looking.

When he pushed a slickened *diletto* into her body, she clamped down, tightening over the invading phallus. Longing surged through her. She wanted his hands and mouth everywhere, especially at her breasts. Achy tightness spread across her chest. Her sheath and womb throbbed where the thick phallus filled her.

She let go of her worries when Mark bent over her and set his mouth to sucking and licking between her legs. His mouth and tongue worked in conjunction with the hard invader. Long, slow pulses built deep inside. Each stroke was a sweet reminder of the pleasure he could so generously give.

She gasped as he pushed the phallus deep. Deeper. The need to squeeze at the rigid piece, the need to capture it and crush it, required all of her strength.

Mark stopped licking at her. He glanced up, his eyes hard black points.

He let the phallus slip from her body. She lay gasping.

"You'll do as I say? Anything I say?"

"Yes. Yes! Just say it." She arched up, trying to find relief from the frustrating and unfulfilled build up.

"You aren't leaving this bed today."

"I don't want to."

He held the *diletto*, slick and shiny with her fluids and the lavender oil. He stroked it along her puffy feminine lips before he

pushed it into her body again. "You won't be able to very soon."

She arched a little, accepting the hard erection. "Mmm, yes."

"Anything, Katrina?"

"Yes. Is it going to be wonderful?"

"Let's just call it decadent. And unforgettable. And you will be very, very tired at the end of the day. Now, no talking until I say you can. And no sexual fulfillment unless I allow it."

"Then hurry."

"No talking." From within the bedcovers, he plucked up a riding crop with a leather flap smaller than her palm and brushed it along her bare thigh. "You wanted everything."

*Where did he get that*, she wondered, forbidden from asking aloud.

She pressed her lips together, but watched him brush the strap back up her leg before he braced his hand against her hip and rolled her slightly. He flicked the crop against her bottom. She gasped. Shocked more than hurt, she stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

"If you say my name, I will stop. Only my name."

She nodded. Fear was a strange inducement for sexual tension. Her body was tight with need, but Mark's orders left her strangely wary and alert.

"Now, lift your legs. Keep the *diletto* inside your body."

Clenching aroused her, but she lifted her legs, holding her knees with her hands. The scent of lavender was strong in the air.

"I'm going to go downstairs in a few minutes and collect our breakfast tray. I want you to remain here, ready for me. But I have something for you first. Do you remember how much you enjoyed this?"

He held up another of the *diletto*, shorter and slimmer than the one inside. Her womb and bottom clenched. He positioned one of her legs, opening her wide.

"Don't let it fall out."

The first touch against her sphincter caused her eyes to roll back and her head to loll. She moaned. Mark eased the molded phallus into her—warring against her body's natural instincts. She fought against the fullness. Resisting. Pulsing. New pleasures coursed through her body. Decadent and wicked. Her tormentor—that was how she saw him—guided her to dark pleasures she had not known existed.

Pleasures that were well beyond once-a-week couplings with her husband and the few escapades she'd had so far with Mark. Pleasures that required discipline and determination. What else did he have in store? Could she endure? Would she find exquisite gratification? Or embarrassment and shame? Pain?

What he did then caused her breath to begin an aroused gallop. And burning shame heated her body. Shame that she allowed it. And wanted it.

Shame that she was so wicked.

The *diletto* was deep inside her, but Mark used his fingers, touching her intimately at the tight ring of her anus. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

Her body gripped and pulled at the intrusion and then his fingers were inside, making sure it was fully embedded. And then he circled the rim, stretching her a bit, exciting her and shocking her. "What a pretty little ass you have."

Only the thudding sound of her heartbeat seemed normal. She bit at her lips, unwilling to look at him.

Controlling the surging pleasure seemed impossible. Her body clenched and spasmed.

Teacher. Lover. Debaucher. *Mark*.

"Put your legs down but leave them spread," he said, standing and walking toward the dresser at the side of the room where a pitcher and a basin were centered. He poured a draught into the basin well and washed his hands. He flung them dry before he picked up another piece of leather. "Have you ever seen one of these?"

She was barely able to concentrate on his words. Keeping the *diletto* inside took effort.

"Supposedly when knights went off to the Crusades, they strapped their wives into a chastity belt so they had no choice but to remain faithful." He set the cool leather over her mons. "I don't see how it was possible in the long term, necessities and all. But for a few hours? A day? I think that would be possible.

"I hope this isn't uncomfortable. I wouldn't want you too excited before I get back." He rolled her, wrapping leather strips about her legs, fastening buckles until she felt the tight but pleasant strain about her lower body.

He tapped the leather where it covered her sheath, where the *diletto* protruded slightly, sending hot pulses through her.

"There. How do you like that?" Mark sat beside her, staring down at her.

How did she look? Wild-eyed? Panting? Very near release but trying to hold back? Ready to curse him?

Ready for him to take her further down this path toward discovery and dark pleasure?

She ran her hand over his thigh and brushed over the distended fullness hidden inside his trousers.

“Now, now. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” There was a slight mocking in his tone, but she also saw the intake of breath and that his own arousal goaded him. Still he seemed in full control. “Would you like to suck my cock before I leave?”

She shook her head no. Of course, she meant yes, but this was a game with two people. A game she wanted to learn.

“I could make you,” he said.

Again, she shook her head.

He looped his finger over her nipple and areola, working outward in ever widening circles. He leaned over her and sucked the hard nub into his mouth.

She gasped, while running her hand through his hair, trying to keep him there and allow her satisfaction.

When he drew away, he placed his hand where his mouth had been and used his finger and thumb to pinch at her. “Do you want your pleasure?” he asked, all sweetness.

She nodded when she wanted to scream yes. Not talking was the hardest of all his tortures.

“Not yet,” he said before pushing up from the bed.

“Yes,” she said.

“Did you say yes? Oh, my dear Baroness, you broke the rules.” He grabbed the crop, rolled her quickly and swatted her bottom twice in quick succession.

She bit at her lips. The pain was real, but so was the shock of mounting tension in her body. It would take nothing at all to feel the sharp ascent of pleasure and the breaking crashes when she came back to earth. Nothing at all, if only Mark would help her.

He threw the crop aside, rubbed his hand over her ass and said, “Obey me.” He cupped the back of her neck and forced her gaze to his. “I can see the fire in your eyes. The battle between getting what you want and discovering if you are missing something. You won’t know unless you do as I say.”

He kissed her lips. Softly, as if it weren’t a game at all.

His hand was at her ass again, kneading, forcing movement of the *diletto* deep within her. Against her lips he whispered, “When I come back, you are going to suck my cock and then I’m going to put my cock in your ass. You are going to scream. You are going to beg. But first on all fours. I want you to give me a small taste of your skills. Show me what you can do with your luscious mouth.”

He encircled her waist, helping her up. Her middle was on fire, every movement causing sparks that could ignite the tinder of her arousal. His hand smoothed over her bottom again then kneaded the

palmful of ass cheek.

“Oh God, Mark,” she pled. She couldn’t control herself another moment. Clenching didn’t help, only exacerbating the problem. “Ah. Ah.” Her middle—her stomach, her ass, her sheath—all clenched in one heaving spasm. She screamed and went to all fours. She arched, then held her breath before she began jerking. Each sharp pleasure spread through her limbs, tremors weakened her until she collapsed upon the bed.

She was aware that Mark watched her, and that added an element of embarrassment at her wanton behavior. He soothed her neck and brushed back her hair. At last, she breathed normally, but she was still susceptible to all the same arousal pressures.

Then he stood, what tenderness he displayed gone. He tore at the falls of his trousers. His erection was already full, hard and jumping with vigor. “Open your mouth.”

And she was as eager as a Vauxhall trollop. She turned her face and opened her mouth, taking what he would give her, staying her with his hand at the back of her head. She lapped at the swollen, purple tip.

“Enthusiastic. Good girl,” he said, taking away her only opportunity to excite him. He smiled at her while he tucked away his cock, still hard. He left his shirt out, covered to his thighs, but threw on a robe, which he tied about his waist. “I don’t want to frighten the downstairs maid,” he said. “Oh, one more thing before I go.”

Katrina knew he was enjoying himself.

“Stay exactly where you are and think about what I will do to you when I get back.”

Then he threw a blindfold over her eyes and tied it securely. His hands caressed her bottom again and then she felt his lips touch one of the tender places where he had applied the strap.

She heard his footsteps across the floor and then the opening and closing of their bedroom door.

Should she disobey him? Yes. “Damn you, Mark,” she said in a whisper, because she had to get the words out before she exploded.

How long would he be gone? She endured for long, long minutes but her impatience grew. What else could he do to her? She’d always thought she had a high level of curiosity. She was discovering that she had no imagination whatsoever.

Without him in the room, she had nothing to think about except her vulnerable state—naked on all fours with a chastity belt, a relic of the past that Mark had all but rendered useless by fastening it to her while she was impaled with *diletto*.

Time dragged. A clock somewhere in the room ticked with

deliberate slowness.

He wouldn't know if she pleased herself while he was gone. She pushed slowly to her knees, testing the limits of her vulnerability. The leather between her legs was pliable, the protrusion of the phallus very noticeable and moved with a gentle push of her hand.

Should she take off the blinds? Or would it give her away if she reknotted the cloth incorrectly?

She traced over the leather bindings, holding back a smile as she felt her way along her bottom and up to her waist. She was thoroughly exposed from behind, except for the straps where they wound around her thighs and then around the mounds of her ass. The contraption was secure and her mind couldn't quite figure out the brackets that her fingers traced.

Lastly, she touched at her bottom—touched it the way Mark had. The *diletto* was firmly inside her, which gave rise to a wave of sexual anxiety.

She went to her haunches, wondering how long she would be required to wait. The sensations were myriad—pressure, fullness, want and the achiness that proceeded release. Mark had only to help her along with a little nudge. Maybe his mouth at her breast. Maybe his cock in her bottom, as he promised.

She growled in frustration. “Mark,” she said again, not because she wanted it to stop but because she wanted the sweet anguish to continue. Whatever was next, she needed it. Hanging from a precipice and unable to save herself was maddening torment.

She squirmed, unable to stay immobile, as he'd ordered.

Again, she thought of removing the blinds. She wanted to straddle Mark, rub his cock and find her release. She reached for her blindfold.

Behind her she heard the “Tsk, tsk, tsk” of correction.

A slap on her bottom followed. She gasped and fell forward on her hands, leaving her in the position Mark had wanted.

“Say my name.”

She couldn't. She had come this far with him and she couldn't be found lacking as a mistress at this point.

Another swat was applied, landing on her thigh. The sting went deep and she felt a start of tears.

“Say my name.”

When she said nothing, she heard the swish of material as he removed his clothing. “What did I promise?”

He settled on the bed near her hands. “You may have your release now, Katrina.” A finger traced up her arm and then cupped one of her breasts. Slow kneading turned the ache into a swell the consumed her

body. He cupped her other breast. "Come closer."

He used his hands to guide her, tugging at both nipples, one than the other. She must look like a milk cow in the barn and he tenderly working her udders. When his cock touched her chin, she opened her mouth and took him deep. He twirled her nipples and kneaded her breasts, turning them with deliberate slowness, all while she sucked at his cock.

Blindfolded, on her hands and knees, forced to wear such a demoralizing contraption.

When he reached between her legs, touching the *diletto* through the leather, she squeezed against the fullness. The tightness spread through her body like the light at dawn. His hand pressed harder between her legs.

Groaning, she pulled away from his cock and shuddered. The violence caused tremors in her sheath and bottom, her limbs went weak and her release pounded through her in hard beats that went on until she died. She moaned loudly, pressing her open mouth into the bedcovers to still an urgent scream and a final paroxysm.

Katrina jerked and convulsed until she could do nothing but fall to the bed in surrender and submission. He fell over her, and his hand slapped her thigh then dug under her where he pushed against the leather, causing the *diletto* to work in and out of her.

With each pulse, increasing in hard pleasure and surprising pain, she screamed his name into a pillow.

Sweet, sweet death.

Just when she thought she could take no more, he removed the leathers and the thin phallus protruding from her ass. Mark, slicked with oil, eased into her from behind and started the torture anew, thrusting in urgent movements, his cock feeling obscenely large, and the phallus in her sheath crushed with contractions until she thought it would break.

She, a slave to the pleasure, rode through peaks and valleys until her body could take no more. Until her body wept with his fluids, and tears streamed from her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark should have taken greater joy in such a consummation.

Watching her while she thought she was alone in the room—*merde*! No honorable man could resist such sights, let alone one whose honor was in question.

Wasn't it what he obsessed about when he could not persuade his wife for the smallest affection? In the secret recesses of his mind and heart, where dark things lurked, did he not wish to fuck himself into



mindless oblivion with beautiful women?

He rolled the Baroness to her back and straddled her, leaning over and allowing his cock to dip into the valley between her breasts. There he stroked to his final, exhausting release, and watched the pearly fluid pool at her throat and then dribble down her neck.

Her delicate fingers lay against his thighs.

He did not want to call it sordid. It was his idea to partake of such debaucheries and she had heartily joined in. What should have been a feast of pleasures had turned out to be...slightly disconcerting.

Katrina did not move, but he watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

The blindfold had come loose at some point. He tossed it aside. The chastity belt, where it was still attached, chafed against her flesh, so he removed the last buckles. He pressed a kiss against her skin, where he'd inflicted red welts as he assailed her. And this was all under the guise of play?

The second *diletto* slid from her body with ease. He placed his hand against her thigh gently, as if she were fragile and he a big clumsy oaf, and turned her to her side. She drew her leg upward. He had to admire her again. Blemishes such as he had made against her flesh were akin to slashing a knife across a masterpiece.

"I'm sorry, Katrina. I won't—I can't do that to you again."

"It was just play."

"No, it was more than that."

When he finished the slow caress of her body, she reached for a corner of the sheet and used it to wipe away the fluid on her chest and neck.

He leaned and pressed a kiss to her forehead, closing this strange chapter of sexual exploration, or at least this dangerous and hurtful portion.

"When you finish dressing, we will enjoy more of Le Carre's food," he said. "Meet me on the veranda."

He actually needed some air. Mark was surprised to find his acceptance level of unbridled debauchery wasn't where he'd thought. Did it have something to do with his growing affection for Katrina? Or were dark pursuits more thoroughly enjoyed in anonymity?

He left instructions for service and then walked through the library to the veranda, facing the river. The homey outdoor area was peppered with marble benches and wrought iron tables and chairs along with lovely flowering plants and newly planted shrubs.

He plucked up a perfect blooming flower and brought it to his nose. Katrina had probably been such a bloom to her husband—

flawless, feminine and devoted.

He twirled the flower between his fingers, staring out to the river before finding a seat.

Character wasn't something he had ever questioned in himself. At least he hadn't until Christina had proposed the scheme that had saved the family. Where was his honor, where was his virtue and wisdom?

He'd seen it others: the speck in a friend's eye, the mote to blur one's vision.

And all the while he had a log in his own eye.

He'd seen plenty of fools part with their money. Father had lost nearly everything, his vices numerous. Gambling, horses, daring investments.

Others Mark knew were drawn to the darkness of sexual exploits. Reading between the lines, his sister Christina's few words about Dane drew a picture of a man haunted and driven to extremes. Did Mark want to be that man?

He also knew that what he did today could lead to a lifetime habit he was not sure could be controlled. Did he want to be at the mercy of his sexual desires?

Did he want to inflict that desire on Katrina?

And what happened once he remarried? A wife would never agree to such disciplines. Would he then keep a mistress to satisfy those special cravings?

What he did know was that he had never been subject to addictions. He drank lightly, he gamed occasionally and he never smoked. Sanguinity came naturally. Perhaps that is why this episode felt different. The dark edge was new and dangerous.

"Mark?"

He turned toward her with a smile and handed her the pinched-off blossom.

She brought it to her nose. "Mm. Honeysuckle."

"The food should be out shortly. Here." He pulled a chair for her and just as she sat, the lone footman carried a large tray to the table.

"Oh yes. Pour me some tea. I feel parched."

The footman quietly arranged a tray of delicacies, including small apricot cakes, lavender shortbread, fresh fruit, cucumber sandwiches and cheeses, then he poured tea before departing.

"Sugar?" she asked.

"Please. Two spoons." How could they have been engaged in such activities not thirty minutes ago? Mark could read no sign of her feeling about the engagement.

She took a spoon for herself and then poured milk before sipping. "How I wish I could bring my sons here to enjoy such a peaceful idyll."

"Here?" Mark asked, brows raised.

She smiled, cup to her lips. "Well, someplace like it. I think they would enjoy the water and climbing the trees. Those things boys cannot do freely in London."

"That is also why men trek to the country—to do those things that cannot be kept secret in the city."

"I wish I did not have to be anyone's secret."

Mark glanced at her, but she stared into her cup. "Eat up. I thought I would take you rowing on the river afterward," he said.

"Rowing? I haven't done that in ages. I insist on manning an oar."

"You do?"

"I must show you the strength of Russian women. We cannot be thought weak under any circumstance."

"Anyone who knows you would never think such a thing."

"Truly? Oh, this is delicious—have you tried it?"

She held an apricot cake for him. He opened his mouth to accept her offering, then gripped her wrist before she could pull away. He swallowed the cake after a few chews and then leaned toward Katrina. He kissed her lightly and then again, longer and with more purpose.

"Yes, it is good," he said when he pulled away.

It was more than good. It was terrifying and compelling and insane.

Once again, he had to wonder at Katrina Klee. Her glacial reserve displayed itself at the worst time. He suspected they'd experienced something wholly unique and worth discussing, yet she acted as if their exchange were completely normal and therefore easily ignored.

And he did not know how long he could traverse this ledge with Katrina without tumbling to his eventual demise.

## Chapter Seven

“I will race you to the river,” Katrina said.

She’d already gathered her skirts in one hand, her parasol gripped in the other, and laughing, surged ahead of Mark and his staid pace before he had a chance to accept or decline.

“Katrina! Wait. You’ll hurt yourself.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see his stride had lengthened and his smile had broadened. She only laughed again and ran ahead, as fast as her feet and her short stride would allow.

By the time she reached the narrow, downward path to the river, Mark had nearly caught her.

“Slow down, Katrina. You will tumble into the water.” Then he caught her, his grip tight about her upper arm, his other arm snaking about her waist. He whirled her about so that she was behind him. “Now we will see who actually wins the race.”

“Cheater,” she said, still smiling and still determined to get the best of him.

Mark didn’t hurry but he remained ahead of her, supposedly to catch her if she did take a tumble.

They burst from the path into an open area and scared the three goats munching grass near the river. The mother goat was tethered to a spike in the ground, the two kids began jumping and bleating with excitement. At the water’s edge, the brush had been cut back and the grass trimmed by the dutiful goats.

“Well, hallo,” she said. The two babies trotted up to her and she held out her hand.

“Be careful, they might eat your skirt right off you.”

She laughed as they nibble at her fingers. “Oh, they are so adorable. Do you think Le Carre would mind if I took them home?”

“He probably wouldn’t, but your neighbors might.”

“Lord Dursk already thinks our household is full of misbehaving boys. Mrs. Balfe wouldn’t say a word. Two goats would hardly be noticed.” She stood upright with her hands at her waist. “Now, hand me my oar, sir.”

Along the shore was a triangular dock with two rowboats, one painted bright yellow and white, the other white with a blue stripe around it.

“Which boat?”

“The one that will not sink.” Mark shed his jacket and handed it to

her. He proceeded to ready the small rowboat by testing the oarlocks and then untying the weathered rope from the pile.

He reached back for her, holding the boat steady while she stepped in. She clutched his hand, unwilling to lose her footing at such a precipitous moment. She really did not believe Mark would allow her to row, so she said nothing, settling on the plank that would face him.

"It's been so long since I've done this. The last time I visited St. Petersburg, rowing on the Neva during the White Nights was *de rigueur* and beyond spectacular."

"White Nights?" Mark climbed in and pushed off.

"*Beliye Nochi*," she said with a sigh. "Well, the city is so far north and because it is at such a high latitude, the sun does not set from the middle of June to the beginning of July. It is marvelous. Oh, you must see it!"

She held his jacket in her lap, he gripped the oars and put his back into the sculling, shooting the rowboat upstream.

Katrina retied her bonnet, all the while staring at Mark's arms and shoulders. She popped open the parasol and tilted it so she could still see him fight the current while she fought the urge to wish for something more. Being his lover was the most interesting and exciting thing she'd ever done. But something more involved permanence, which didn't seem likely.

"When was the last time you were in Russia?" he asked.

"Before I married. Many years ago. It's mostly cousins now, on both sides of the family. One aunt, my father's sister."

"All Romanovs?"

She laughed. "You heard? Well, while the story is true, it is doubtful tsars or princesses or heads of state know Katrina Angerstein's name, let alone those of her children."

"Why return at all?"

She waved a hand. "Men. You sound like my oldest. 'But Mama, I am a Klee.' Well, it is our heritage and I think they need to experience it."

"So, your sons have not been to Russia but you think they would enjoy it?"

"Not yet, but I hope soon. I was born there. When my parents came to England, I was only six. My grandfather was already an acclaimed craftsman and he wanted one of his sons to continue the trade. He was a respected smith in his own right, but you know how family duty can be."

"But no son to pass on the trade?"

“Alas, no. And to my knowledge, none in Russia either. Such a shame, the Angersteins were the finest craftsmen,” she said wistfully.

She trailed her fingers in the water, watching the oars as they cut through the water and caused small wakes, remembering how it was growing up Russian while living in England. Being too shy to speak to other children because she did not understand them. The need to be accepted and then understanding what it meant to be a cit. She was versed in all the fine arts, but she was still on the outside, looking in. Even after she married Samuel Klee, she tried even harder to be amongst the fashionable set. Perhaps that was why Russia still called to her. Maybe that was where she really belonged.

Even when Mark had approached her that first night, hadn't she had several moments of joy at believing this was her moment—that at last she would be accepted into their inner circle?

It had been a constant internal struggle—wanting to succeed in English society and knowing she was indisputably Russian.

Was that why she was so willing to participate in activities, which while extremely pleasurable, were also a bit intimidating?

She was like an explorer who had found what she was searching for, only to discover she was searching for the wrong thing. Hadn't she committed to making Mark happy, while satisfying her need for physical pleasure? Wasn't that what any mistress would do?

With Mark's handling of the oars, they traveled far upstream, conversing about the sights along the river with a bit of gossip about acquaintances and innuendo about their liaison mixed in.

A fish breached the water. “Oh, did you see that?” she asked.

“Just a sprat. My oar probably went through a school of them.”

“We should have brought our poles.”

“I brought mine.” He glanced at her, with a lazy grin, and pulled back on the oars, speeding them on.

“Are you sure you want fish nibbling on it?” she said. She had a natural rhythm with Mark, understanding him with but a few words.

“Not fish, no.”

“I'm perfectly willing to perform a mistress's duty, but not in a boat. I don't swim and I fear if I ended up in the water, these skirts would draw me under quicker than you could say Davy Jones.”

“Never fear, I will rescue you if such a catastrophe were to occur.”

“Well, that is good. Now if you would be so kind as to prepare me a place, I should like my turn at the till.”

“If you insist,” he said. He pulled one oar into the boat and then scooted to make room for her. “Take my hand.”

She set aside jacket and parasol and reached for him. The boat

wasn't as wobbly as she had feared. Mark leaned suddenly and she fell into his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck.

"This is convenient," he said.

Katrina stared into his eyes, warm with laughter. It was only natural to kiss him and he was of the same mind. They met in a fiery, open-mouthed kiss that lasted several long seconds until they had to pull away just to breathe.

The boat had turned about during the exchange.

"My," she said, licking her lips as she pulled away. She would like to know that he was all hers, that she could touch him and run her fingers through his hair and stroke his bare arms and caress the arch of his foot or drape her arm about his waist on a cold, chilly night. It was good. She had forgotten all of the simple pleasures that went with having a mate.

She had forgotten what it was to enjoy intimate contact with the male of the species.

"My. My. Mine." He kissed her again. "Now, shall we see if you are really Russian or just a braggadocio?"

"*Hmpf*," she said, before sliding to the plank beside him. The oar was smooth and oily, having been well-handled in the past. "Ready."

Mark leaned forward and she kept time with him, though her strokes were a bit shorter. He immediately adjusted so they were sculling in harmony and the boat seemed to move swiftly with the current.

They didn't speak, but the peace between them was easy and Katrina enjoyed the lapping of oars, the occasional birdcall and the bodily heat. His arm bunched with each pull and they rubbed along together. She'd forgotten the pleasant pull of muscle and the roll of the oar in her palm. She smiled to herself, thinking that she was now straining the last of her unused muscles. Tonight, she'd crawl into bed and sleep like a dead rock.

When they arrived at the dock, they accidentally shot past it, and Katrina let out a small gasp.

"Let me," Mark said. She tried to return to her spot, but he said, "No, just come closer."

She scooted next to him, secure beneath the shelter of his arm. She brushed her hand across his back and set her other hand to his thigh.

The position was a bit awkward but he gripped the oar, turned the boat quickly and somehow got them to the dock, where he grabbed the piling. Water splashed and the boat bumped lightly against the small pier. He wrapped the rope tight and then took a quick step out of the boat. She stood, lifting both hands to him, and he swept her up

and into his arms.

“How did I do?” she asked.

“Mother Russia would be proud of her daughter.”

“We are not fragile like English women. We can bear cold winters, deliver strapping sons and never leave a scrap on our plate after a meal.” She laughed and glanced at his expression to see his brow pulled low. “Oh, Mark, don’t let me do that. I meant no disrespect to your wife.”

“None taken.”

“We have a saying in Russia.” She repeated it just as her mother had. “Which means, ‘you cannot throw a word out of a song’. Susannah was part of your song and to avoid speaking of her now or to avoid mention of the son you might have had takes away part of your song, part of you.”

“It is difficult, that is all,” he said with a clipped edge.

He clasped her hand and led her away from the dock and toward the house. The grass was recently trimmed and the world smelled just a little differently as the small blades dried in the sun. The scent added to the melancholy of the moment.

“I cried for a week when Samuel died. And then one morning, I looked up to see my sons, their eyes full of unshed tears. I stopped crying so they could shed theirs. Every family mourns in their own way.”

\* \* \* \* \*

That night, Katrina left for their room first—already the nervous anticipation of what they might do stirred in her belly and worried at her thoughts, but she was prepared and naked, and completely enthralled with him, if not in all they did.

And she thought she would be tired!

He came to her quietly, the door closing with barely a whisper and his tread soft without his boots. At the end of the bed, he stood and shucked his robe, revealing the strength of his broad shoulders and the muscle that defined his torso and limbs. Clean-shaven and smelling of some scent that spoke of forests and torrential rains, he climbed onto the bed with her. Maybe there was the scent of the grass blowing up off the lawn too.

He was beautiful, really, more so than any man of her acquaintance. Certainly he was manlier than Samuel.

She was prepared for roughness, for darkness, for something new and curious and shocking. Maybe he would tie her at wrist and ankle? Or maybe something equally outrageous?

But he came to her, lifting the sheet away and mounted her



without a word. His cock, ever firm and empurpled, pressed into her belly as he lowered his body over hers, like a blanket made of heat and muscle and tickling hair.

She wrapped her arms about his neck, pulling him close so their lips touched. She hummed at that first contact, so intimate, their breaths mingling as if their souls reached out to embrace the other. Then their mouths connected. Moist heat, like wine on a summer's day, filled her mouth as she drank him in.

Playful as their tongues touched. Urgent as their need escalated.

His fingers slipped along her skin and up her neck, twining with her hair. Her nipples were hard beads against his chest, rasped by the gentle movement of his body rocking over hers, as he thrust with unthinking need because his body was made that way, whether or not he was inside hers.

She traced the contours of his arm to the roundness of his shoulder. Spreading for him, she encouraged him to fill her. He reached for her bended knee and wrapped it over his waist, caressing down her thigh as he did so.

Some things were too perfect. Mark Turnbow as her lover was one of them. The slow way he aroused her was another. Many of their best interludes had been fast and hard and without care, each daring the other to keep up.

Tonight, he seemed in no hurry and she didn't mind.

There was a certain tenderness, a deep caring as their bodies melted and melded into each other. When he lifted his hips, she felt the gentle prod and the determined search before his cock slid into her moistened sheath. His hum vibrated through her. Her sheath clutched at his manhood.

Their kiss ended on a sigh. His mouth looked for anything he could suck or lick, eventually trailing down to her breasts. Mark pushed up, his shoulders high above her, his head hanging down as he tongued one nipple and then moved to the other.

She closed her eyes against the drugging influence of pleasure. One of his hands caressed over her face and then pushed into her hair, sweeping back until his large palm brought her face even with his. He kissed her again, deeply. Without hesitation.

Under him, she writhed, her body trapped by his and the increasing tempo of his deep thrusts. She dug her nails into his back then wrapped both legs about his thighs, unwilling to let him go.

Tightness built in her back and throbbing beats pulsed between her legs, becoming unbearable because she wanted more. Mark dipped his head again and latched on to her breast. She surged upward and he pushed deep, his weight bearing down on her mons, his mouth and

tongue tormenting her breast.

Inside, the ache of arousal kept her in a tight grip until she finally burst, soaring until her body clenched and jerked, gripping Mark's cock in the final spasm of release.

Mark was in a similar state. She was vaguely aware of his last hard thrusts and his primal groan when he finished after her. She was more aware of his body as he enveloped her again, his hot breath against her neck, his sweaty cheek against her brow.

Her legs relaxed. When Mark felt her movement, he rolled gently away to his side, facing her with his eyes closed. His hand was still draped over her chest, palming her breast with no particular goal, just lightly caressing her womanly bits. A soothing action Katrina enjoyed no matter which man's hand performed the task—husband or lover.

As a lover, though, Mark was vastly superior. She could honestly say she was happy his mourning period wouldn't end for months.

\* \* \* \* \*

The double doors leading to the second-floor balcony were open and the curtains waved as a gentle breeze wafted in, filling the room with the scent of rain drenched earth, wild flowers that grew near the river and the reek of male goats. A rooster crowed somewhere nearby, though Katrina hadn't seen a chicken coop on the property.

Other than the oddities that went on here, she really loved this house and its peaceful surrounds. Every smell in the country was pure and strong, the sounds like wind chimes; even now the wind in the trees caused the leaves to rustle in song.

Was it possible to peacefully wake to such surroundings when one had three boys? Or lived in London? She missed the sound of their voices and their occasional morning outbursts, but had a moment of joy thinking of them enjoying the same sort of day in Surrey.

She stretched clear to her toes, the ache a stark reminder of yesterday's activities, and then rolled toward the warmth next to her, curling in behind Mark. She draped her hand over his waist, the light bed sheet between her forearm and his skin.

There was so much she'd loved about being married. Being a wife.

Waking up next to a man was one of them. It was certainly better than waking up alone, with the spot next to her cold and empty. And there were the smells of a man. She pressed her nose near his skin; light perspiration and some cologne scent leftover from his last shave teased at her senses.

A man one could be proud of, she thought. And that knowing the person next to you belonged to you. That he was all yours.

And there was the bit of self-importance in having a husband

known in the *ton*.

She had felt that with Samuel. She had respected him and he'd done all he could to provide for the family.

But with Mark, everything was more intense. Magnetic. Captivating.

Oh, it was a beautiful, reflective morning and she felt a certain peace too.

The scent of bacon or ham wafted up the stairs, along with the yeasty fullness of fresh bread. She drew close and whispered in his ear, "I'm starving. I'll be downstairs."

He muttered something and hugged a pillow closer.

Katrina eased from the bed, moving as if her grandmother had taken possession of her body. Sore and stiff, she worked her arms and legs and bottom. Bruises had formed on her thighs. She twisted to see her backside, only to groan at the effort. It was easier to see the outline of Mark's palm prints from the vantage of a cheval mirror.

She worried at her lip. The episode was full of strange pleasure and odd embarrassment.

"Breakfast," she said softly, needing to be alone with her thoughts for a while. She slipped into a rail and robe then departed the room, glancing to see Mark's head buried beneath a pillow and a blanket covering him from his feet to his bellybutton.

In a small room, wrapped with windows and a peaceful view of the backs, Katrina found the sideboard, laden with the aromatic meats she'd sniffed earlier. It was far too much food and she hoped Mark was hungry.

There was only one servant in the room, who remained quiet while she filled her plate. She spooned eggs, ham, steamed tomatoes and potato hash along with two thick slices of warm bread and slabs of butter.

The footman was there to help with her chair as she sat at the table. She smiled tremulously, aware those in the house knew why she and Mark were in residence.

Their activities weren't so private after all.

Temporarily blinded by the search for pleasure, she was now faced with a moment of reality. This sort of liaison could ruin her.

She reached for the *samovar*, amazed to see such unique Easternware on Lord Le Carre's table. Katrina poured a cup of tea and then saw the Russian makers-mark from Tula. Mark said Lord Le Carre traveled extensively, so it should be no surprise.

In the recesses of her memory, she could hear her father say, "traveling to Tula with my own *samovar*," with his heavy Russian

accent. She chuckled. In Tula, *samovars* were everywhere.

Should she be surprised to hear a moral authority from her past? Papa was so careful of his reputation, and by extension his family. There was no one to stop her from enjoying this affair, other than her own conscience and, this morning, it was screaming to be heard.

If only she didn't have three sons to watch over. If only she knew this secret affair guaranteed a happy ending.

Well, whatever she was feeling now, she'd made the original decision with a clear mind. And she meant to go on as she'd started.

The breakfast complete, she filled another cup of tea and headed to the kitchen. Mark had not joined her and she didn't mind the time to herself, but right now, she needed some liniment.

She peeked inside the kitchen to see a single servant. Katrina wagged her finger and the girl hurried toward her.

The girl bobbed a curtsy, "Ma'am?"

Katrina explained what she needed; the girl smiled.

"Oh, certainly." There was a cabinet on one side of the room. Inside were jars with stoppers and small tins with handmade potions. The girl dug around, rattling the medicine containers until she found what she was looking for and also plucked out a folded flannel square. Handing it over, she said, "Camphor and Florence oil. It will relieve any painful ailment."

Katrina held back the embarrassment. She hadn't said it was for pain, though it was. Goodness! What went on in this household?

Back in the room, she found Mark turned to his side, his legs drawn up, and facing the double doors with the full window. She eased the door shut.

"I'm awake," he said, then glanced over his shoulder at her. "You already had breakfast?" He rolled to his back, stretched his legs beneath the sheet and punched the pillow behind his head.

"Yes, and there's nothing left, I was so hungry."

"What's that?" He pointed his chin toward the container she carried.

"Relief," she said. She shed her layers of robe then sat on the bed naked.

Mark sat up. "Lord. I am a cruel bastard." He touched her hip, drawing his fingers lightly across her bruises. "They look worse today."

"But they don't hurt—"

"Yes, they do, or you wouldn't have a salve to provide that relief you were talking about." He pulled his sheet-covered knees up and rested his arms. "Hand it to me." He wiggled his fingers. With the

other hand, he made a pass across his face and into his hair.

"I can do it," she said.

"But I'll enjoy it. Come, now. Lay down."

She stretched out beside him, on her stomach, and closed her eyes. He twisted the lid. Camphor wafted in the air. "Ew," she said.

"The cure is worse than the ill?"

"Use the cloth. I don't want you to smell like camphor for the next week."

"Are you sure you are all right, Katrina?" He touched her lightly.

"We escaped London to be free, didn't we? Unbridled passion? Naked frolicking?"

He ignored the cloth and dipped his fingers in the sticky oil. He applied it to her thigh first and worked toward her left buttock, rubbing in slow circles. "It was more than that. I have my doubts about what we've done here. What I did."

She sighed. "Me too. Mm, that feels good." She elbowed up. "Mark, I do not feel much guilt in my life because I haven't really done anything. I have been the proper wife and mother. You have given me an opportunity for something new. So yes, I feel awkward—maybe even a little embarrassed—but we agreed to this."

"We didn't agree to abuse."

"Is that what you think happened?" His hand made long passes up and down her back, with just the right amount of pressure. She lowered herself to the bed again. "I would love this every day," she said.

"We still have a few days left."

"I was hoping for many more."

He worked the liniment over every sore muscle and then went back over her skin again, drawing lazy circles here and there. She sighed, enjoying the pure bliss. When he finished, he wiped his hand with the flannel cloth and closed the tin.

He settled beside her, bracing his head in his hand. She could feel his erection against her thigh, but he didn't seem interested in pursuing sexual activity. "Have I told you that you are the most beautiful woman I know?"

"You've never said a word. Am I?"

He used one finger and brushed strands of her hair behind her ear. She shivered at the small intimacy. He might think he was imperfect, but Katrina was a bit blinded by his appeal, his manliness.

"Well, you are."

She smiled. "What shall we do today?"

"I think it's going to rain."

“That would be a shame.”

“It would, wouldn’t it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Their last two days together at Le Carre’s large home at Henley-on-Thames was a short but idyll time for them.

Katrina, ensconced on a plush couch under the gazebo near the river, read one of Le Carre’s graphic stories. “I particularly like this version of Robin Hood,” she said. “Le Carre really does have an active imagination. Maybe I will get to meet him someday.” She licked her finger and turned another page.

Mark squatted in front of the outdoor hearth, striking a flint into the pile of tender. The day was typically English, some sprinkles in the morning and a cool breeze this afternoon, especially so near the river.

“Maybe that camphor would start the fire with more ease,” she suggested.

Mark laughed. “Or I could burn that book.”

“Oh, no! The writing is just so humorous. Do you think he will be in London any time soon?”

“You might start a correspondence with him. He’s very private otherwise, except in trusted circles.”

“It is probably a bad idea. Correspondence has a way of being found. I’m just curious where he gets his ideas.”

“His group of friends might better be called a group of degenerates. One doesn’t need to look hard for inspiration when one is sitting at the dinner table, conversing about an individual’s peccadillos.” Mark turned a little, planting one knee on the rock floor. “This house is full of little oddities, if you haven’t noticed.”

“We’ve been here for the last two days doing very little. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I was enjoying our time together and I didn’t want him to interfere. You haven’t heard the expression ‘curiosity killed the cat’?”

“Hm, not in Russian, or at least that I know of. You know something you’re not telling me.” She closed the book and sat up. “Tell me!”

“It’s more like something I’m not showing you.” He glanced up at the sky.

“We are leaving tomorrow. Please, Mark. It is the last chance I’ll have to see anything remotely improper.”

Mark braced his hands against his thighs. “If you insist. Since you own several *diletto*, maybe you won’t be so shocked after all.”

She pouted. "Do you think I am an immoral woman?"

He stood and held out his hand. "Hardly a word I would use to describe you. However, you are my mistress and some would call that immoral."

With a quick tug, she was on her feet, one hand to his chest.

"Besides, if you are immoral, does not that make me immoral also?" he asked.

They took the short rock steps to the grass then headed for the house.

"You know how the *ton* judges its women, while supposed gentlemen are allowed to brush off any indiscretion," she said.

"I can only answer for myself. I do not think less of you for your inquisitiveness, for your generosity or for your wickedness," he said with a lowered voice and a one-sided smile.

She nudged him with her shoulder. "Thanks. I think."

Inside the house, they returned to the library, and Katrina was a bit disappointed. "But we've seen everything in this room."

"Not everything." He walked to one of the bookshelves and reached behind a neat row of Debrett's volumes with matching spines and polished leather.

"Ah, here we are," he said.

She heard the latch give and watched as Mark pushed the shelf, which turned on some sort of pivot. Katrina crossed her arms over her chest. "I just got shivers. A secret room?"

He laughed but took her hand and led her through the short passageway. There was a fresh scent of polish; the room had been recently cleaned. Where did a man find such loyal servants? Required to keep such wicked secrets and walk about with submissive gaze and unquestioning devotion, as if they were ignorant of all activities.

"Not a secret room," he said. "A sex room."

"Oh, I have seen everything now."

"That, my dear, remains to be seen."

"Whips?" she said, approaching a display. She walked by, running her hand along the table edge but not touching the implements. And, blushing, recalled how one certain leather implement had been applied to her bottom. She felt the sting anew and clenched against an imaginary lash.

"Before you ask, I must tell you I have no idea what some of these are for." He stood just inside the door and watched her.

Katrina stared at everything, as if she walked through the British Museum of Erotica. Except there were no markers to name the tools or toys or whatever they were. No guide stationed nearby to answer her

questions. Her imagination had stopped cold, unable to travel farther down the dark paths of sexual exploration.

After nearly a full turn about the room, she said. "I am a naïve fool, aren't I?" She stopped at a swing, connected to the ceiling with two large iron hooks.

"No, Katrina. Some prefer to live in darkness, others only want to glance at it from time to time. Others want to pretend it doesn't exist. But I know one thing—I don't want to be trapped in it, as some are."

"Like *Le Carre*?" she asked. He nodded. "Why did you bring me here then?"

"For the same reason you wanted to come. Because I found in you someone who could walk with me along the edge. Explore those things that tickle the imagination."

"But what have we found?" She fiddled with the odd accouterments and the rope that connected to the swing seat. And watched him. He spoke of darkness and chains; love was the ultimate prison when it was a one-sided affair.

"That we enjoy each other, with or without exploring darkness," he said.

She must not look at him with such longing. They were friends and lovers. She did not want to spoil that perfection. Add wife to that mix and she would score the *ton* triad.

"I enjoy my time with you, Mark. I really do. Now, we leave tomorrow and I would have one last little adventure. You'll have to help me. It's a bit too high."

"And you can't figure out why?"

"Hm." She hated it when he knew something she didn't.

"Let me get a candle quick," he said.

The sun was moving toward the horizon and the windows in the room were too the east. Mark returned with a five-stem candelabra, already lit, and she was no wiser to the use of the swing other than, as well, a swing.

"Still haven't figured it out?"

"No."

He stepped close and held the two ropes, showing the movement of the swing in relation to his groin.

"Oh! But what about these?" she asked, touching the leather belts.

"To strap your thighs in." He made a gesture which was a little obscene but indicated the straps would open her to whoever was assisting with the swinging.

"So, it would be best if I were naked."

"Everything is best when you are naked."



Katrina laughed, then wrapped her arms about his neck and kissed him quickly. “This is a fabulous secret we share. Ten years from now, when I see you across a crowded ballroom—you with your new wife and me with my new husband—and our gazes meet—know that I will be thinking about this adventure.”

She reached up and grabbed a rope in each hand. Mark’s hands encircled her waist and he lifted. Wiggling a bit, she hoisted her skirt so that Mark could see her thighs—and the fact she wasn’t wearing underclothes.

“This is not very comfortable.”

“Imagine how it would feel if you were naked.”

“And my legs should be higher? Like this?” She lifted and opened her thighs. “Imagine how *you* would feel if *I* were naked,” she teased.

“I don’t need to imagine.”

“So, I should swing a bit? Is it like horseshoes? Or pall-mall? Aiming for the right target?” She kicked off her shoes, then leaned back to rock the swing. She wasn’t getting much leverage, so she placed her stockinged feet against his groin and pushed away gently.

Mark grunted. His lids had half-masted and he reached for the placket of his trousers.

She pushed again, this time against a burgeoning erection.

Katrina leaned back, her hair loose and billowing. She laughed as the swinging motion increased. Mark had to step back, and he placed his hand over his exposed member.

“I think you are defeating the intended purpose of the swing.”

She laughed and leaned back, accelerating the swing. “But it’s fun.”

Another pump and she soared.

The loud noise caused them both to look up. A *crack* followed, then she screamed.

Katrina flailed, Mark reached for her, but she fell, landing hard against an oak desk. Crumpling to the ground, she grabbed her shoulder, groaned in pain and then burst into tears.

## Chapter Eight

Mark stared out the window for much of the return trip to London, but his hand cradled hers against his strong thigh. Katrina glanced at him. His jaw clenched with agitation, though when she whispered his name, he turned with a smile.

"The trip was wonderful, Mark. Please don't berate yourself for my carelessness."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "I won't forgive myself."

"I will rest for a few days and no one will be the wiser."

"If I had known—"

"But you didn't and now we do. Besides, a woman of my maturity does not belong on a swing to begin with."

Her shoulder still ached. The glass of brandy Mark had forced down her last night had dulled the screaming pain to a throbbing hurt, and this morning it seemed almost decadent to swallow back another glass before the carriage journey. The sling helped stabilize her arm, but an occasional jolt was severe enough to make her wince in pain.

Since the incident he had barely touched her.

He sighed and turned toward the window again.

"Mark, are we to ignore this? Accidents happen."

"You partially dislocated your shoulder. I caused this accident. It is further proof I am ignoble."

"I only had to say no. I am just as much to blame." She leaned her head to his shoulder.

"I am very sorry." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Please forgive me."

"Of course." She squeezed his hand in reassurance. She had children, after all. Accidents happened no matter how careful one was. For Katrina, only her first child had caused her any real anxiety. After he'd experienced a cut or scrape or bad fall, she'd learned it was impossible to protect him every moment. Claud had been even more rambunctious, but she'd fretted less.

"Have you ever wondered if you are the person others believe you to be?" Mark asked.

"Does it matter what others believe?" She laughed. "Oh my. That was the most ridiculous statement I have ever made. I have been concerned with what people think of me for years. Lady Klee—the cit determined to worm her way into the Beau Monde. The Russian émigré with grand designs on any titled gentleman to look her way."

“No one thinks such a thing.”

“You are a *man*. Men more easily absolve women of their ambitions regarding marriage out of their desire to protect. And other reasons.”

“Because you are beautiful, you mean?”

“Would you have looked at me twice were I not?”

“Guilty,” he said, his mood seeming to improve. “We have a tendency to place value on the superficial only to regret it later when the woman in question refuses to provide us pleasure. When will we learn?”

“I hope beauty is not superficial. I hope—”

“You needn’t worry. You are warm and beautiful to your core, Katrina.”

“And yet you fret over a decision which makes you believe you are less than an honorable man. Would it make you feel better if I told you I was attracted to you for the same reason?” She nudged him and he slid one arm behind her to hold her close, but being very careful not to press her sore spots.

He took a deep breath, his chest expanding, before he said, “The earldom was substantially in debt due to my father’s gambling.”

“A common problem, but his sin is not your sin.”

“It became my sin. You have not met Christina.”

“No, I have, actually. At one of my soirees last year. Remember?”

“That’s right—I had forgotten. Christina mentioned it to me also. My sister will not be happy I am telling you this, but you need to know the kind of man with whom you’ve agreed to share a bed.”

“Mark.”

“No, it must be said. Especially in light of this.” He glanced at her sling again. “Christina found out about my father’s substantial debt and what it would mean for my brother John’s psyche. You knew he was confined? Well, she thought to rescue the earldom by selling herself to the Marquess of Dane.”

“Sell? Sell?” Katrina sat up and faced him, brows raised, forgetting the dull ache at her shoulder. “What do you mean?” The marquess had been at her gathering too. Suddenly, his surprising appearance there made more sense.

“She believed she had one thing to sell in order to save the family. She sold her honor to the marquess. I allowed it, maybe even secretly wanted her to do it. What brother would be so callous?”

Katrina bit at her lower lip. “Mark, you don’t need to tell me.”

“You need to know.”

“I need to know or you need to tell me?”

“Both. She came to me with her rescue scheme. I postured with reasons why she shouldn’t, but—what kind of man allows his sister to do such a thing, especially when it could taint every day of her future?”

What could Katrina say? Did Mark not see the similarities? Even widows had honor. Had she not sold hers as well?

“Had you said no, would she have proceeded without your approval?”

“I said nothing. I think that is worse. I consented with my silence.”

“So, I should infer you are a terrible person who allowed your sister to do what she intended to do all along, and that you are despicable because I climbed into a swinging chair in order that I might experience some dark pleasure with the evil Earl of Compton? Stop the carriage,” she proclaimed dramatically.

“*I am* the earl.”

“You weren’t then. Your brother was the earl and should have been making decisions.” She leaned back then, realizing what plagued Mark. “Are you intent upon carrying every woe in your family upon your shoulders?”

“There are just things I wish I could change.”

“As we all do. Oh, Mark, do not punish yourself. We all make our own decisions, pretending to have taken advice from our friends and families only to do what we wanted to do all along. Just as I made the decision to be with you.”

“Was that so hard?”

“You have no idea!” She laughed, remembering her slightly desperate thoughts. “Maybe you would be charmed by my naiveté. *Mark Turnbow*, I thought. What could he possibly see in me? And then I thought...”

His expression was blank, though his cheeks and ears had pinkened at her humorous adoration. Did he believe her?

“Well, I was happy to accept your tantalizing offer,” she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

They arrived in London at dark, and within the hour had rolled onto the street in front of Katrina’s home. Mark hadn’t said a word since the carriage wheels hit the cobbled streets and she felt the weight of awkwardness between them.

A painful burn welled in her heart. Who would have imagined a week away would have driven a wedge between them instead of drawing them closer? Wasn’t that why she agreed to the private interlude? To earn his admiration? And just maybe...

She was not willing to admit to the secrets she hid in her heart. To speak those things was to feel those things—deeply, and in ways she'd had to crush for most of her life.

But all good came to an end, did it not?

The coachman gave a quick yell to the horses and the carriage lurched to a stop. Mark's arm was there to keep her from tumbling from her seat.

Katrina touched his knee and squeezed lightly. "Thank you, Mark. It was lovely."

He cupped her neck, drew close and pressed his lips to hers. Warm, slow and delicious. How had she gone a whole year without experiencing a man's touch? She hated to give it up. Had Mark developed any affection for her? Even just a little?

Could she survive another year without the fire of physical intimacy, once she and Mark parted company? Something had changed between them. Her accident was the cause, but she didn't understand his reasoning.

Mark had withdrawn, and rather quickly. Had what they'd done been such a bad thing? This accident with her shoulder was a trifle compared to the wonder she'd experienced up to that time. It wasn't frightening; it was exhilarating!

"Katrina—" Mark cleared his throat.

The carriage door rattled, then swung open, revealing her brother-in-law, Peter.

Mark and Katrina drew apart, their actions obvious and furtive. She licked at her lips, as if she could wipe away her indiscretions. *Oh, anyone but Peter!*

"I thought I heard a carriage," Peter said. The smile he wore turned hard. His gaze cut from hers to Mark's. "Katrina, may I assist you?" he said, reaching for her.

"I—yes. Certainly."

As she ascended, Peter's grip tightened against her smaller hand and he whispered through gritted teeth. "I had no idea you would be away. You never said a word. And what has happened to you? An injury?"

"My own clumsiness. I but fell."

"Clumsiness? Indeed." He let out a bitter laugh.

Yes, this encounter with her brother-in-law was both clumsy and embarrassing.

Mark followed her from the carriage. He stood tall beside Katrina.

Peter's assumptions were obvious. And true. And Katrina's stomach clenched uncomfortably because she couldn't deny it and she

couldn't offer any plausible explanation for why she was in the company of a single man. Late at night. Without a chaperone. With a trunk and valise.

"Perhaps a servant can assist with the baroness's traveling trunks?" Mark asked.

Peter glanced between them again before returning to the house. Katrina's skin heated. Embarrassment. Doubt. Anger. And not a little fear. Her emotions coalesced into a worrisome need to apologize.

"Oh, dear."

"You are not to worry. He won't say anything." Mark squinted, watching as Peter took the stairs.

"I'm afraid you don't understand the delicacy of the situation. He knows what we've been doing."

"You were discreet. You did nothing wrong. We did nothing wrong."

"Mark, you need to go."

He leveled a knowing stare but said nothing else. A servant hurried down the stairs, and Peter followed.

The awkwardness was not alleviated. Peter stood with his hands behind his back. She and Mark couldn't say the things that needed to be said. The trunk and two valises were carried up the stairs. A cool breeze stirred, which prompted Mark to action.

Mark, stiff with anger, reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "Goodnight, Baroness." He nodded to Peter, out of politeness, not respect.

Katrina didn't watch the carriage pull away. They'd made no plans. Were they to meet again soon? Would he write? Should she? *Not this way. Not this way.*

She rubbed her temple, cursing her brother-in-law and her own carelessness.

Once inside the house, Peter turned to her and hissed, "Are you mad? You have children. A reputation. A name. Would you start a scandal? Ruin everything the Klees have accomplished?"

"I don't believe it is any of your business, sir." At least Peter was not venting his frustration in front of the servants.

"I am the guardian of your children. My brother would not appreciate this sort of conduct. They are impressionable. They are young and unsullied by the ways of the world."

"Samuel is dead. And Lord Compton has been kind."

"And that gives you the right to—to do whatever it was you did?" He glanced toward the door. "You have travel trunks. Where were you? Not at a *ton* ball. Did you stay with him? Unescorted?" He'd

braced his fist against his hips. He clenched his jaw and said, "You will not see him again."

"Peter, you have no say in the matter." Her voice rose in anger, only tempered by the knowledge there were servants nearby and children upstairs.

"Don't force my hand."

"It's late. Do you not need to be on your way?"

"When I arrived and found you away, I had a room prepared. I will be staying the night and we will talk further in the morning."

"You and the boys were not to be home until tomorrow night."

"And I will consider it fortuitous that I arrived in time to save your reputation and that of the Klee name. Now, may I escort you to your room?" he asked.

"No, I have matters to attend."

He bowed and then planted one foot on the bottom stair riser. "When Samuel died, I offered you a very honorable life. There is no reason to behave in this manner when you could be my wife."

"I'm not looking to marry. I'm sorry." Why should she apologize for wanting to be independent? She had earned her freedom with the death of her husband. "No, Peter, I am not sorry. I'm a widow of some limited means. I may do as I please."

The man she would have happily married was now escaping into the darkness with horse and carriage.

"That makes it so much worse, I'm afraid."

Katrina watched him trudge up the stairs. She would insist he leave early in the morning. He might be the children's guardian, but that did not give him license to interfere in her life.

She had no real reason to dawdle, so she followed up the stairs a few minutes later. She glanced into the boys' rooms to see they were fast asleep. Another pain stabbed her middle. Her boys were growing. They too would soon be pestering her about their own independence. Hadn't Ivan already made some of his wishes known? Her man-child, ready to take his place in the world since his father was gone?

When she woke the next morning, she dressed in a plain muslin gown. Her arm was stiff but movement was less painful, so she ignored her sling. It was best not to alarm the children or remind Peter of last night.

Another stout shot of whiskey would give her the courage she needed to face Peter and erase the residual pain of her encounter with an oak desk.

Peter waited for her at the small table the household used for breakfast. The sky was overcast, but clearing. Bursts of blue came and

went as the clouds churned, but plenty of light flooded the comfortable nook. There was no place to hide and she was very inept when it came to masking her expressions.

He'd already set the morning paper aside and sipped at a cup of black coffee. He muttered a few polite platitudes while she filled her plate at the sideboard.

"So how long have you been intimate with the earl?" he asked.

Katrina raised her brows but took a seat beside him anyhow. She was a direct woman, but she was not unkind. The peevish anger that washed through her was foreign and unwelcome. She enjoyed life of peace except for this one thorn. "I will not say it again, Peter, but it is none of your business."

"You may think you are free to do as you wish, but here is what will happen. You will not see him again."

"You cannot stop me."

"There are choices, of course. We can marry."

"Marry? We will not, as I've already stated." He had pressed for marriage a few times since Samuel had died. She'd always thought it out of concern for the boys. His demand now made her think it had something to do with *her*.

"Or you can continue your affair, and I will require the boys live with me in Surrey until their maturity."

"Samuel wanted me to raise the children."

"He appointed me their guardian for a reason. I doubt he had cause to think you would make such a stupefying decision."

Katrina folded her hands in her lap and entwined her fingers. Was any man worth losing her sons, even someone such as Mark? The answer was clear. Their liaison was temporary. Perhaps it would end sooner than she had hoped, but it would end.

Or she could just tell Peter it was over. Lie to him. How would he know what she was doing once he returned to Surrey? She met with Mark only four days a week. Peter wouldn't find out...unless he was determined to harass her over this.

Only she wasn't a liar and wouldn't become one for the sake of her temporary convenience.

"So, do I have a maid pack the boys' trunks?" he asked.

"You wouldn't do that to me. You wouldn't take my sons when you know I love them more than anything in this world."

"Then I must love them more than you do because I would do anything to protect them, even from their mother's willing indiscretions."

Tears burned in her eyes, but she forced them back and gritted her



teeth.

"There is another solution," he said.

"And what is that?"

"I am not sure you can stay away from him on your own volition. I fully understand the beastly and undisciplined nature of some men. If he is determined to have you, I believe you will give in, in spite of what you think are your best intentions."

"If I give my word, I will keep it."

"Which I notice you have not yet given."

"I don't believe you will do this to me."

"That is because you don't know me as well as you think you do."

"So, what is this other solution?"

"You have wanted to go home to Russia for some time. Now would be the opportune time to go."

"I don't understand."

"You need time away from this lecher, and you need time away from your sons. They need a manly influence and you need to recognize your duty. It is a privilege, madam, that I have allowed the boys to stay with you until now. I see that privilege has been abused."

"This is absurd."

"Only this morning, I sent a servant to obtain departure times for ships to St. Petersburg. Five days should be sufficient time to say your farewells. While you are gone, the boys will stay with me. When you return, I will agree to return care to you. I think six months is enough time for you and the earl to overcome this illicit fascination."

"In five days? And I'm to be gone for six months?"

"You don't have to go, Katrina, but I imagine a house such as this will feel quite lonely without your sons."

"Samuel would never forgive you for this, if he knew. I certainly won't either."

And what about Mark? How could she explain this farce to him? Then, there was the possibility it would be a relief to him. What man wants to land in the middle of a quarrel, with a family not his own?

The answer was clear. She would never give up her sons. Never.

"All right. Then I won't see him again. You have my word." Even as she said the statement, she plotted how she might see Mark again. Peter would never go through with this extortion. She could hardly believe his threats were real.

"Do I need to have a conversation with the earl or would you be willing to send him a courtesy note?"

She swallowed back the bitterness. Was Peter to deny her this bit of happiness she'd had as a widow?

“I will take care of it.”

“Katrina, don’t be fooled into thinking I believe you. I don’t know what your attachment is, but I can see your emotions are controlling your will.”

If Mark ended their acquaintance, that was one thing, but for her to end it, when she had no desire to? *Oh Mark, how can I?*

He was important to her, but there was one thing more important.

She tried to rationalize and bury those emotions Peter called to the fore, and those which Mark incited in her. Trapped, like a hare hiding from hounds.

“I will go to Russia, but I will take the boys with me.”

“No, that is unacceptable. Their staying with me is part of your penance for such an indiscretion.”

“Penance. More like punishment.”

“Call it what you will.”

She and Mark had a very enjoyable few months together. He was going to remarry at some point. And she had a perfect excuse for not seeing him that would require neither a long explanation nor would it hurt him with hurtful rejection. He’d been troubled by her injury. She could let him think that was the reason why she had to give him up. They’d enjoy sexual excesses and she’d been hurt. There. Simple as that.

Only she hadn’t really minded.

And she hadn’t really meant to fall in love with him.

Katrina was saved from a flood of tears by the arrival of her sons, who at the very least were happy to see her. And after quick kisses to her cheek, they delved into an enthusiastic litany of their adventures of the past several days.

They were not overly coddled. They were growing into fine young men and would soon have lives apart from hers. She couldn’t give up time with them. She couldn’t sacrifice them to fulfill her desires.

Damn Peter. He was going to get his way, at least as it pertained to Mark.

But not the boys. Never her boys.

She would die old and alone, without a lover or love, before she gave up her sons.

*Oh, Mark.*

Katrina wrote the note ending her one and only affair.

## Chapter Nine

Mark puzzled over Katrina Klee while he chased scrambled eggs about his plate. *Damn her note and her excuses.*

He would always remember his time with her as the perfect interlude. Undemanding. Comfortable. Pleasurable. But that night was an embarrassment Katrina should not have had to endure.

What kind of a colossal prick was her brother-in-law? Mark regretted his part in her exposure, and he would have had her home early, had he known the bastard would be waiting on her doorstep.

Mark was disrupted from his breakfast by the butler. "My lord. Your sister, Lady Dane, and her husband are here. Would you like me to have them wait in the gallery?"

A visit from any of his sisters was a wonderful interruption, especially Christina, since he was closest to her. However, her dark lord and now husband could return to the pit of hell from which he came. Ah, there was no accounting for taste, and for some godforsaken reason she loved the man.

What man could possibly tell his sister no? *I'm a fool. Had I told her no, Dane would not be in our lives.*

He heard the wail of a baby and couldn't help but smile. *Nor would my darling Lucy be in my life.*

One had to take the bad with the good.

"I'll be right with them." Mark finished his coffee, diluted with plenty of cream and sugar, before he threw his napkin to the table and left the breakfast room.

Dane kept to himself much of the time. His return to the bosom of society had been slow and meticulous. Christina did not hound him about their role as leading members of the Beau Monde and allowed him to do as he pleased with regard to formal invitations. Mark suspected it had something to do with her newlywed status and Lucy's needy charm. Intense love had that effect. And a new baby? Well, who didn't want to smother her in affection, as he was about to do.

Mark strolled into the room, nodded to his brother-in-law, kissed his sister and swept Lucy up in his arms.

"To what do I owe this early pleasure?" He turned his attention to Lucy before Christina could answer. "And how is my little pumpkin?" He clucked Lucy's chin and earned a slobbery, toothy smile while her hands and legs jerked with enthusiasm.

Even though he loved Lucy, seeing her bloom with health only reminded him of the lifeless body of his son, who had not even taken

his first breath.

“Dane and I have business this morning, and I know I should have asked earlier, but you mentioned your wish to spend more time with Lucy. And, well, you have an opportunity this morning since Meg and Diane are in Somerset with Grace.”

Had his sisters been in London, Mark was certain they would have fought over the child, since they were both newlyweds and had no children of their own. Yet.

“An inconvenience, to be sure.”

“She is your favorite niece.”

“You are leaving Lucy with me? A confirmed bachelor?” His words meant nothing. He had to at least pretend he was put out by the notion. Even though he was Lucy’s legal guardian, he wasn’t really meant to care for her with any sort of regularity. And he certainly wasn’t prepared for such a responsibility should something dreadful happen.

“Nanny Jocelyn is here. You needn’t worry that if Lucy cries or wets herself that you’ll be called upon to care for her.”

“Then why let her stay at all?”

“You sound a bit frightened? What do you think, Dane?” She glanced toward her husband, her gaze full of adoration. “Have we made a mistake? You know she can walk on her own, Mark. It is not like you will be required to do anything but admire this beautiful child we have created.”

“Can you now?” Mark said to Lucy. “You weren’t walking when I saw you last.”

“Ma-Ma,” Lucy said. The antique clocks that Grandfather had collected were lined at one side of the gallery and began chiming the ten o’clock hour. She squirmed in his arms and he hoisted her so she could look over his shoulder. “Dee,” she said, pointing one finger at the clocks.

“Don’t ask me what she said,” Christina offered.

“Ding, I think,” Dane said, his only contribution to the conversation so far.

“Of course, I accept your offer,” Mark said. “Lucy will have to suffer with me in the library while I finish my correspondence.”

“While she’s there, teach her to read, please. I’ve heard that children who can read early are much smarter in their adulthood.”

“If anyone can teach her, I can,” he said.

Christina inhaled sharply, and said, “There is something else. I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Mark bent toward her and whispered, “You are leaving him?”

"If you weren't my brother, I would blacken your eye. No, some wonderful news, actually. Dane and I are expecting another child."

He smiled slowly. "That is wonderful news, Christina. And congratulations to you, Dane."

"Perhaps this time we will have a boy," she said.

"You know it doesn't matter to me, darling," Dane said, finally approaching them. He slipped his hand behind Christina's back, and Mark imagined the gentle caress and loving connection.

The scene sent a sharp needle of pain through Mark's heart. Envy should be the last thing he experienced, but it was there, staring him in the face, prodding him with angst and anger and need. He wanted what they had and he felt himself hugging Lucy tighter in response.

"Dee," she said again before putting her finger in her mouth. She stared at Mark, accusing him with her big eyes before she put her wet finger in his mouth. "Mou," she said.

Christina laughed. "Well, we mustn't stay any longer. We have commitments."

"What time might I expect you?"

"Late, I would imagine. I promise, we won't even wake you. Don't worry, Nanny Jocelyn will take care of everything."

Not everything, Mark thought. Not by a long chalk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy was entertaining and provided a much-needed distraction. He wondered how many earls in London knew the names of their nieces and nephews, let alone played with them. He had little experience with child rearing or child playing, yet he found himself loving his niece more than he had anyone in a long time.

But it was a brilliant afternoon with a clear sky, so he arranged for his horse. He and Lucy would ride together. There was never a better time to meet the young boys and potential suitors for his most precious niece. His sister Grace also had a flock, both boys and girls, but they were rarely in London, so they would have to wait.

Would those young marriage candidates throw their toys and cry unceasingly? What would it matter if they were an heir to a duke? They would get none of Lucy's attention when she turned sixteen. Mark had a long memory.

Did they say please and thank you to their governesses? Did they keep their shoes on and not throw their caps? Then perhaps...

"Oh, my lord. We surely can't take Lady Lucy out. Not on a horse," Nanny Jocelyn exclaimed, hand to her chest and puffed up with concern.

“We can and we shall. You will have a tame mare, short in the leg. You do know how to ride?”

“Of course, my lord, but Lucy certainly doesn’t.”

“We will rectify that shortly.”

Said niece was walking around the perimeter of the room, holding on to chairs, grasping plant stands and falling to her bottom at intervals. As soon as Mark swept her up, she would slide or crawl from his lap and begin investigating anew.

She appeared perfectly content and didn’t seem to miss her parents at all. Mark took all the credit for keeping her properly entertained.

“The horses are ready, my lord,” a servant said.

“Lucy must have a coat. And shoes. She is not ready to be seen in public.”

“A blanket and a warm cap will suffice. I do not intend to let her run wild. And being seen is precisely the reason for going.”

“Oh. Oh. This is not a good idea, my lord.” He had the nanny so flustered, he thought she might begin turning circles in the library.

“Hurry or we will leave without you.”

Nanny Jocelyn fled the room then, her footfalls echoing to the back of the house to the servants’ stairs.

“Well, my little lady, are you ready?” He opened his arms and she took a few alarmingly unstable steps in his direction. “So, Christina thinks you walk, does she? Let us hope you take to riding as a true noble would.” He swept her up and Queen Lucy was happy to be back on her perch. She looked around, allowing Mark to hold her securely until the put-upon nanny reappeared with the required garments.

“Nana,” she said. Then, much to Mark’s chagrin, Lucy reached out to her cruel nanny instead of clinging to her beloved uncle. And the cheeky little girl, with a dribble of saliva on her chin, grinned at him as if she knew what she was doing.

Once Lucy was secure in her blanket and had a woollen cap pulled over her pink little ears, they headed out of doors where the horses waited. Mark took the squirming bundle and, one-handed, mounted Titan, his bay stallion. The stableman assisted the nervous nanny.

Mark positioned Lucy in front of him so she could see. She tensed her body, and squealed with excitement, both hands fisted and shaking and peaking from beneath her blanket.

“Horsey,” Mark said, trying to imitate the baby talk he’d heard from his sisters.

He clucked his tongue and the horse trotted away, knowing its way to Hyde Park. He glanced back once to see Nanny Jocelyn was

still astride and following, though bouncing with each stride. Christina was sure to hear of the jaunt, but that is the price a mother pays for leaving her child with a single brother. He could at least show Lucy some adventure before she was confined to her room with her governess until she was sixteen.

If he had to judge his feeling about future daughters based on his feeling about his niece, he was sure he would commit some great crime on anyone who dared to harm his children. Of course, such a scoundrel wouldn't live to tell the story.

Lucy settled, lulled by the gait of the horse. He glanced down at his niece's head to see her brownish curls bush out around her cap. She'd also found a way to get one hand free of the blanket and had popped two fingers in her mouth. She rubbed her thumb along the satiny edge of the soft wrapper.

Owing to the beauty of the day, the park was full of his acquaintances, from every stratum. There was a duchess with her entourage; a gaggle of governesses with their charges; nobles galloping through Rotten Row.

And a baroness strolling with her brother-in-law. One of her sons was with her. The youngest? He held a decorative kite, tail dragging in the dirt. And Katrina? Vibrant and beautiful as always. She was not wearing a sling. It had been a few days since the original incident; perhaps the mishap and resulting injury weren't as severe as he'd feared. No, she had to be in pain. She'd nearly dislocated her shoulder and that sort of injury did not heal in a day or two.

He'd been able to put her from his mind, for the most part. It had taken a Herculean effort involving letter-writing and Lucy, but he'd been able to think of something other than why she'd so easily dismissed him.

It was complicated he knew, but surely, if he could talk to her alone, they could come to a new agreement.

He'd been mistaken about the drinking, though, as his mind wallowed in the memories of their time together. No, he had not really been able to think of anything but her in spite of Lucy's innocent charm. Katrina was there, soft as a spring breeze rustling his weak composure.

In truth, his love was reserved for one woman only, and she'd effectively ended any further development of their passionate affair. *Love? Maybe. Yes, probably.*

Could he declare such a thing? Was he prepared to in order to win her back? No. Obviously, she did not feel the same.

He pulled at the leather straps wound through the fingers of one hand and Titan came to a stop, blowing from his snout and jangling

the reins of his harness.

Katrina held her parasol as ladies did, tilted slightly. Protecting yet displaying. Her free arm was held at an angle. He noticed her thumb was hooked into a sash around her waist. The explanation was obvious—she did not want to elucidate about wearing a sling. And for that his face heated. She was as rare as the silver crafted by her family, and he had harmed her with his excesses.

Her dress, a summery shade, made her vivid looks all the more startling. Her strange violet-colored eyes were wide with anxiety. She did not want to see him, or rather, she did not want to see him while she was with Klee.

Klee tipped his hat. Katrina nodded.

“Lady Klee good day to you. Mr. Klee,” Mark said. “You’ll pardon me for not removing my hat.”

“Your hands are full, I see, Lord Compton,” Katrina said. She wore an approving, practiced smile.

“My niece, the Lady Lucy Conover.”

The arm Katrina protected moved slowly when her son pressed to her side. Other than the tightening of her jaw, she expressed no symptoms of pain. He could see the display of her wrist and the meaningful bracelet she wore. A gift and an heirloom.

“We are out for her first horse ride. I have high hopes she’ll be a fine equestrian someday.”

“Then she is in excellent hands. This is my youngest, Sergei,” Katrina said, introducing Mark as Lord Compton.

“My lord,” Sergei said, bowing smartly. The boy was definitely her son, his Russian heritage obvious in his features and fairness. He had Katrina’s eyes.

Klee cleared his throat, throwing Mark his sternest, disapproving gaze. “Perhaps we ought to continue our stroll.” He could posture all he wished. Katrina was not allowing him to touch her, a telltale sign to be sure.

“Peter, would you be so kind as to take Sergei along? I would have a private word with Lord Compton.”

“I do not think that is appropriate.”

“This one thing is not up to you, and we are in public.”

Mark waited while Peter Klee bent to Katrina’s will. He wondered how many times she had to stand up for herself while Klee made a nuisance of himself and made her life uncertain. He dismounted, shuffling Lucy to his other arm, and waved to the nanny to remain seated.

Katrina smiled at him but turned her attention to Lucy. “She is a



darling. I always wanted a girl."

What could he say? That she should be happy she had her three sons? Or that it would be his great honor to provide the seed for such a venture? "I am quite taken with her."

"You should have one of your own. And soon," she said. She lifted her eyes to meet his questioning gaze.

"Katrina?" He wanted to take her in his arms, but there were too many strollers and onlookers, some of whom already eyed them with ripe speculation.

"Oh, don't worry. Everything is fine."

"Is it?"

She looked down for a moment. "Mark, you know this must end. I am sorry, but I have my sons to consider."

"I don't know any such thing. We will be more careful. And he should mind his own damn business anyway."

Mark found himself rubbing Lucy's back, trying to keep her from squirming in his arms, but the park was full of interesting things to see, and she didn't care about conversing with the beautiful Katrina.

In fact, Lucy interrupted the conversation with another wet, freshly pulled-from-her-mouth finger point. "Hos."

"Yes, horsey," Mark said.

"Mark, I need to be going before Peter intrudes again."

"When will I see you next?"

"It's over, Mark. I'm sorry. It was wonderful. Really. And thank you for the gifts. That you took time to find such beautiful pieces means the world to me." She flipped her wrist and the bauble winked in the sunlight. "It is all I really have of my family's heritage.

"Goodbye," she said.

She turned away and rejoined Peter, not looking back. Not one last touch. Or one last kiss. Not even a goodbye really.

"Hos," Lucy said again.

"Yes, Lucy, but couldn't you have said something clever like 'please don't leave him, Katrina'?"

Lucy grinned, one arm waving and she hit him on the face.

"I deserved that. Now how about we find you a filthy rich duke's heir?"

Once astride Titan, he glanced toward Katrina, disappearing over the horizon. Two others had joined the small party. Her other sons, most likely.

Mark followed Katrina's lead and turned away, not looking back either. Their aimless jaunt continued, but soon he felt Lucy's heavy weight in his arms. She'd fallen asleep, her head hanging awkwardly.

Obviously, she was bored with the crop of nobles on display in their three-wheeled push carriages.

“Home it is then.” He propped her against his shoulder, her face buried at his neck. “Lucy, don’t take this the wrong way, but I wouldn’t mind having three sons myself.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I don’t understand, Mother. You’re going to Russia without us? You always said we would go with you. To meet our relatives,” Ivan said.

How could Katrina explain it to Ivan without revealing her true reasons for leaving them behind?

*Because your uncle demanded it?*

*Because I was caught in an indiscretion?*

Her choices were simple: make herself look bad or make Peter look cruel.

She hadn’t the heart for either so she would go quietly. The reality was, she had wanted to return to Russia for years. The other reality was that she and Mark would eventually part. Why not do so when they were at the height of their happiness rather than wait for him to find another paramour? Or a wife.

She was not experienced in this sort of liaison, but really, what noble actually married his mistress?

Katrina had sent her lady’s maid to clean and polish the boots she wished to take with her on the lengthy trip. One of Katrina’s smaller trunks was propped open on the bed and two larger ones, lids braced against the wall, were being packed. Ivan had brought the proceedings to a temporary halt.

“I don’t want you to go. None of us do.”

“Ivan! Stop. I am going. You and the boys are staying with Uncle Peter and he has promised to take you to Scotland, where you can spread your wings without me nearby to nag you about being careful. I expect he will allow you any number of liberties that would horrify me.” And his motivations would be dishonest, allowing them freedoms in order to curry their favor, which in turn might endear Katrina to Peter. Such flawed male logic, if that was what he thought. A certain dark spot in her heart still churned with anger toward Peter.

“We could hunt in Russia just as easily.”

“I suppose you can, but not this trip. And weren’t you the one who was so adamant about *not* going to Russia with me?”

“Well, I didn’t know you would leave without us. Or so soon.”

She caressed his cheek. “So, my boy isn’t so grown-up after all?”

“Mother!”

“I will be there and back in no time at all.”

“Then take us with you.”

“Ivan, no more of this. The decision has been made.”

And it was hard to hear Ivan’s plea. The news had been announced without preamble.

Then Ivan braced his arms behind his back, looking all manly and in charge of Klee affairs. “Is Uncle Peter making you do this?”

“Why do you say that?” Yes, why was he saying that? Had Peter said something to which young boys should not be privy, especially about a parent?

“I am not blind, Mother.”

“That could mean any number of things.”

“I know he wants to marry you.”

“Then you should also know that I don’t want to marry him. I don’t love him.” Ivan wore a frown. “You will understand someday soon. There are times when a person must marry. For duty, for safety, for the protection of children. But not always. Your father left me, and us, in a satisfactory way. I don’t need to remarry.”

“You want to be alone?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You are saying nothing. Mama, I am not a child anymore. What am I supposed to say to Sergei when he wants to know why you left us?” He shrugged. “Claud won’t ask,” he said, stating the obvious.

He flopped on his mother’s bed, his hands braced behind him. Such a difficult age, she knew. No longer a boy, not really a man. He used “Mother” at every address, unless he was upset.

“I thought you didn’t want to go.”

“I didn’t. But I didn’t think we would be here without you either. Is he making you leave?”

Katrina sat beside him, surprised by his intuition regarding his uncle. “Would it matter if he was? Have I not expressed this very desire for years, since you were a little boy?”

“I thought mothers put their children first.”

“You needn’t heap unnecessary guilt upon my person.” She rubbed his arm, hoping to soothe his sudden insecurity. “He is your guardian. He, of all people, will care for you as I would.”

“Except he isn’t you.”

“All right, enough. I must finish the packing. Weren’t you riding horses with Claud and Sergei this afternoon?”

“The horses are coming over from the mews.”

Ivan jumped from the bed and tugged at his jacket. He bit at his lip, ready to say one last thing. His head hung, as if he were ashamed; his booted toe poked at the lines of the Savonnerie carpet. "Mama, I know it's none of my business..."

"Go on," she said, while arranging muffs and gloves and scarves by color.

"I overheard you and Uncle Peter. That day after we returned from Surrey. Talking about Lord Compton."

She couldn't look at her son, but she continued her task with automata-like precision. Once she'd seen a mechanical musical elephant perform tasks with more grace than she was exhibiting at the moment.

"And what about Lord Compton?" she asked.

"Uncle Peter said...does Lord Compton want to marry you?"

"No, nothing like that. He is my particular friend."

"And Uncle Peter is jealous of that friendship?"

"In a way. It is an adult matter, Ivan."

"I understand adult *matters*," he said. At fifteen, he probably did, but Katrina wasn't ready to think of her son...that way. Not yet.

"You might think you do. Let's have no more of this discussion."

"Why won't you tell me the truth?"

She dropped the scarf she held, strolled toward him again and cupped his shoulder. "Because adult matters often involve ambiguities that aren't clear to the parties involved, let alone to a young man who has never experienced such decisions. I would trust you with the truth, but I don't want to hurt you or to cause any disrespect or concern for those involved."

He was old enough to suspect, if not understand.

Ivan had seemed too old to hug for the past few years, but she took him in her arms anyway. "I love you. And I love Claud and Sergei. For you, I would go to the ends of the earth. Russia is not so far in comparison.

"Now sit with me. *Syadyem na dorozhku!* Let us remember what is important."

## Chapter Ten

It was one thing for a mistress to dissolve an affair. It was quite another when *he* was involved and said mistress cut all contact without so much as a by-your-leave.

Mark thought back on the return carriage ride from Henley-on-Thames, and he had a thousand arguments with himself about why he was such a poor choice for Katrina Klee. How had he allowed such an accident to occur?

He knew, *knew*, Katrina would be finished with their arrangement after suffering such injury. Well, the old adage was true: Play with fire and you get burnt.

Neither of them were truly sexual adventurers. Something had caught fire between them and nothing was taboo as they explored together. It was a strange, exhilarating time, each open to suggestion and demand. Maybe it was wrong to pursue such erotic passion. Mark wondered if he would ever again experience such raw, untarnished pleasure.

But after meeting Peter Klee, Mark wavered. Yes, he'd been careless with such a fine treasure. No, Katrina didn't really want to end their affair. How did he know this?

Hell, he didn't.

He wanted it to be true, therefore it was.

Since their meeting at Hyde Park, she'd missed three of their scheduled evening rendezvous. He'd truly believed their separation was temporary. He had not taken her first note seriously.

How did a gentleman proceed? Take her at her word? Allow her to slip away?

A gentleman would not stalk a woman who had handed him his *congédiement*.

However, there were multiple reasons, reasons he could understand, why she might want to end their liaison.

Did it matter, though? Their association wasn't considered proper. They were not acting as a lady and a gentleman in their agreement. They were involved in an illicit affair, one that would be roundly condemned by any who knew. Mark's mourning period for his wife was months from ending; Katrina's sons would be publicly humiliated by such a disclosure. And what of Peter Klee's embarrassment at such a revelation? All of the Klees would be tainted.

It bothered him most that he'd been careless with her—and that should have been enough to adhere to her wishes to leave her alone—

but it was her brother-in-law who troubled Mark. Had he a say in Katrina's personal decisions? If so, why?

"More coffee, my lord?"

Mark swept the chinaware toward the footman and watched as the black brew gurgled into his empty cup. The fumes were pleasantly strong.

"Thank you," he said. Mark poured the cream and dropped in the necessary lumps of sugar. He swirled the mixture while musing about his muse.

Muses weren't necessarily about creativity, as they were so often described. Mark found Katrina to be a source of inspiration, and it would be unfair to say she inspired in only the physical sense.

He carried his coffee into the library and set about writing Katrina a note. It took him all morning to fill his waste can with crumpled pages, containing lines of drivel. Had any man thought so long and hard about a former mistress?

With one final push, he jotted an easy note that conveyed only one thing. Would she be available to ride with him in his open carriage tomorrow? There would be no reason to decline such a reasonable request.

He scattered sand over the ink and watched it dry. Before he changed his mind, he sent a footman to deliver the message to Katrina.

About the time he decided to ride to his sister's home at Bedford Square, the messenger had returned.

"Well?" Mark said.

"My lord," the footman said. "The household is not accepting messages for Lady Klee. Evidently she has departed London."

"Departed? Did they say when she would return?" It wasn't the footman's fault, but damn he was irritated.

"No, my lord."

Well, hell. What else could go wrong? Finding Katrina had been the difficult part, or so he'd thought. Keeping her was nigh impossible.

He dismissed the footman with a wave of his hand, glanced at the note and threw it to his desk. He was actually hurt by this turn of events, if by *hurt* one meant a knife to the heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christina Conover, the new marchioness of Dane, welcomed him into the Red Room, a sitting area reserved for the family and one in desperate need of renovation. No one who was anyone retained such outré colors in this day and age, but Mark excused Lord Dane,

knowing what he did about Dane's past. Mark suspected every room in the house was decorated in shades of red.

"Grace is going to be very hurt that Lucy is your favorite niece. Of course, you'll be leaving her your entire unentailed fortune," Christina said, followed by a wicked grin. Grace's children were just as beautiful and intelligent, though Mark thought they were a bit afraid of him, spending so little time in London.

"She'll get her fortune from Dane, and mark me, he had better not short change my darling girl. Where is she?"

"Asleep. Nanny Jocelyn took her upstairs not fifteen minutes ago."

A servant entered the room, carrying the refreshment tray. Mark leaned forward to lift the teapot and poured.

"So, what brings you to my doorstep? Without an invitation? I can barely move you with the promise of Cook's best pheasant." Her brows arched in question, but she wore a smile and was happy to see him.

Mark wrapped his hand about the cup, rather than take hold of the delicate handle. He might snap it off in a fit of annoyance. Sitting across from Christina did not alleviate his angst. She had captured her marquess heart and soul, from the first moment Mark thought, though he knew Christina was not aware of the marquess's intense, dark feeling for her until much later.

Christina's cup rattled in the saucer. Mark's gaze jerked upward to see she was staring at him with pointed interest. "Well?"

"Well what?" he asked in return.

"Why have you come?"

"Can I not see my sister without a reason?"

"Some people, maybe. Not you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mark? What has gotten in to you?"

"I shouldn't have come." He set his saucer and cup aside, but he didn't stand. He braced his elbows against his knees. He intended to depart, but little good that would have done. He'd sought out his closest sister to answer an old question: what in the hell did women want?

"Dane has never mistreated you, has he? Hurt you in any way?" he asked lamely. It was none of his business, but somehow their situations seemed entwined. And there were rumors, at least there had been rumors before the pair had married.

"I can see you are in a mood; therefore, I will not answer such an impertinent and inappropriate question."

He plucked up an almond biscuit and shoved it into his mouth

followed by a gulp of tea. "Should I apologize then?"

"Dane's past is none of your business. It is ours and we have resolved matters to my satisfaction. That should be enough for my brother."

"My mistress threw me over," he said, not bothering to glance at his sister. She would think he was to blame anyway.

Christine sipped her tea and then stared right through him. "I see. And you think insulting me and Dane will bring her back?"

"Lord, no, Christina. I just thought...I thought you might offer me insight."

"I am still absorbing the shock of you having a mistress so soon after Susannah's death."

"Men have mistresses."

"With a statement like that, I can understand why you no longer have yours. Were you such a bore with her?"

"I did not want to be alone. Surely that is understandable?"

"Just so you know, if Dane told me such a blunt, unfeeling statement, I would likely commit some crime upon his person."

"Not if I beat you to it. So, you have no sage words?"

"Into why she left? How would I know? I didn't even know you had a mistress. And don't tell me who it is. I prefer the anonymity. Better to meet *ton* widows and not have to think about what might be happening with my brother. Oh, she isn't married, is she?"

"Of course not."

"So, what is the problem? That your mistress threw you over or that this *particular* mistress threw you over? Come to think of it, I've never known you to have a mistress. Yes, I can see your conundrum." She tapped the side of her teacup.

"It's not simple." How did he explain that he was entwined with Katrina in a very physical odyssey, yet on the most earthy, base level he might actually need her?

"Yes, it is. Find another mistress." Christina was rather flip, but considering their mutual decisions regarding the Compton family's future, she had license.

"Would you have accepted such advice about Dane?"

The dark marquess walked in the room just then, his boots clicking on the hardwood floor as he strolled to Christina's side. "Did I hear my name mentioned?"

Mark stood and bowed. "Lord Dane."

"Compton."

Dane bent to kiss his wife's cheek. There was a strong magnetism between the two of them. Mark didn't understand it and wouldn't



have believed it had he not seen the affection for himself.

“Mark is here requesting I solve his myriad problems with an *affaire de coeur*.”

“Does anyone have that much time?” Dane said seriously. Christina obligingly laughed at her oh-so-witty husband’s bland comment.

“Perhaps I should make my departure,” Mark said. While he appreciated that Christina thought the sun and the moon existed because of and for Dane, Mark had yet to warm to his brother-in-law. The reasons could fill a cheap penny dreadful.

“No. Please. Maybe I can provide the benefit of my expertise,” Dane said.

Dane wore an indecipherable smile, everyone in the room knowing, yet unwilling to acknowledge the depravity with which Dane had filled his life. Christina raised her brows, waiting for Mark to proceed into the obvious trap—one which Mark could not escape if he so much as went near. Christina would not forgive him if he besmirched Dane’s character, as if he really could blacken Dane’s name further. Hence the trap.

“I appreciate the offer, Dane, but I must be going. Christina.” He bowed.

“Let me walk you out,” Dane said.

As they entered the foyer, Dane said, “Sometimes the answer is so close to our nose, we cannot see it.”

Mark had tiptoed out on an invisible rope those months ago, handing over Christina’s address in Scotland, trusting Dane with information that could have ruined them all and hurt his sister tremendously. She’d hidden in a quiet little nest—one Dane would have never found without Mark’s help. Why had he done it? How had he trusted Dane when all signs suggested Dane had the blackest of souls?

Mark stared at him, wondering if he could trust his brother-in-law a second time.

“I never did express my thanks,” Dane said.

Mark glanced back into the sitting room at his sister, who’d plucked up a basket of sewing. What he’d done had made his sister happy. Extraordinarily happy.

Their marriage was certainly unusual. Rarely did a woman lift the husband’s respectability, but such was their start. A miracle of light indeed.

“She deserves every joy. I’ll trust you to make sure there is never a dark day in her life.”

“You have my word. You can also be assured I will repay this debt to you.”

“Is that what you think it is?” Mark asked.

Dane pursed his lips for a moment. “What it is and what I think it is are very likely two different things. For me it is a debt of honor. You allowed me to redeem myself in Christina’s eyes, and with my child, which in turn allowed me to redeem myself to the world.”

“I give you leave to try then.”

Dane nodded and Mark departed, glad to be on his way. Why had he come? Did he still need forgiveness? Or had the matter resolved itself? Had karma actually balanced the bad decisions against the good outcome?

Was karma a punishment? Or just a balancing of forces? He felt the punishment keenly, with the loss of Katrina. In spite of Christina’s lack of help, she had hit a sensitive spot.

*It was this particular mistress who’d set him adrift.*

Katrina had become more than his mistress. She was a friend, one with whom Mark could reveal secrets, or reveal nothing and get a sense she understood even his silences.

There was nothing in front of him but emptiness. Even the thought of another mistress brought no comfort. He did not want another mistress. He wanted Katrina.

He reined his horse to a halt and turned toward Katrina’s townhouse. He owed her something—a proper goodbye or perhaps a parting gift. He owed himself to find out where she was and why she had departed without a word. And that she was in good health after the incident.

And he owed Katrina those few words that made partings easier.

When he arrived, Mark was welcomed inside by the servant and his card was whisked away on a salver. He hoped Katrina would receive him. He half expected Peter Klee, offering excuses.

There were several trunks stacked in the foyer, causing him further anxiety about Katrina’s intentions. He hadn’t really believed she’d left London. Was he wrong about this too?

Lord Klee entered the room and gave his bow. “Lord Compton,” he said. Ivan, Katrina’s oldest son, appeared in proper English attire but looked every inch a north man—lean and blond, with bones that would support a tall young man and features that would mature into a fierce-looking warrior. His gaze was a piercing dark purple, much like Katrina’s and the youngest boy, Sergei.

“Lord Klee, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I yours. The footman said you wished to see my mother. I

regret to tell you she is not in residence.”

Did he know? Or suspect?

“I’m sorry to hear that. May I ask where she is? I have business to conclude with her.”

“She will be in Russia until this spring.”

Mark straightened, his brows dropped in contemplation of such unexpected news. Six months? Was that spring in Russia? Or spring in England? Six months might be optimistic on his part.

He could scarce believe it. Katrina leaving her children? Not the Katrina he knew.

He hardened his emotions and his reactions. Evidently, Katrina meant it when she said their affair was over. If he could just speak to her, but alas, that small wish would be impossible to accomplish for many months. And so much could change in the meantime.

“And she left you in England? Alone?” Mark asked.

Ivan smiled, seemingly eager to please. The boy’s gaze was assessing, his head tilted in perusal. “Our guardian is here with us.”

“Peter Klee?” At Ivan’s nod, Mark said, “I see.”

“We leave for Surrey tomorrow, where we will spend the winter. Perhaps there is something with which I can help?” He stood with his hands behind his back. Katrina still saw him as a child, but the young boy in front of Mark had all the marks of manhood. When she got back in six months, she wouldn’t recognize her son.

*Six months*, Mark thought.

Would she recognize *him* in that length of time? What if she found another suitor? One with her history and family connections? Would Katrina have forgotten him?

He didn’t want to think about it. But was he not in the same position? One of freedom? Could another woman garner his attention? Another mistress? A wife?

“She is visiting family, as has been her plan for many months,” Ivan said, filling the uncomfortable emptiness between them. “I shouldn’t think there is a need to worry.”

“No. It’s just—Russia is a fair distance away,” Mark said.

“I told her the same thing.” Ivan smiled again, innocence suffusing his expression and reminding Mark of Katrina’s love and concern for her children.

“Well then.”

“She mentioned you. Before she left.” Ivan’s reserve was similar to his mother’s—not cold but deliberate. Mark was being weighed in the balances.

“Oh?”

“In the vaguest way. Mother believes I am naïve, but I saw the change in her. Perhaps she would like to receive correspondence from you.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded note. One he had prepared beforehand? The boy knew.

Opening it in front of her son seemed a bit desperate, so he tucked it in his own jacket, to read later.

“My lord,” he said, and nodded. “Good day, and thank you.”

It was a strange thing in London, that rite of passage from man to noble. In Ivan Klee’s case, he’d been a noble long before he’d been a man and somehow, he’d transformed with grace and substance. Katrina would be proud.

Just as any parent would be of well-raised sons.

## Chapter Eleven

A chord of longing plucked inside Katrina's memory. She'd experienced it several times since she'd returned to Russia. Oh, and maybe memory was the wrong word. It was driven by the scent of certain meat spices or the *tula* gingerbread baking in the kitchen, and now, the faint breeze stirring behind the curtain, hinting at the sort of cold which froze one's nostrils together.

Yes, if she closed her eyes she could see Papa laughing as he held both her small hands in his large gloved ones, skating backward over a frozen pond. Her nose must have been blood red for it protruded from beneath a woolen scarf, blue and white, she thought, while she screamed in combined terror and excitement. Her teeth had chattered and, yes, her nose seemed to freeze, stopping the cold air from reaching her lungs.

Aunt Raisa *tcha'd* as she knitted, a hint of displeasure over a missed pearl or stitch.

Katrina glanced over her shoulder. "Aunt, what is the word for *pond* in Russian?" When she heard the word, she muttered, "Yes," and returned to her mulling.

Raisa Angerstein was Katrina's closest relative in St. Petersburg, the only living sister of her father, and she'd welcomed Katrina with open arms, in spite of the lack of preparation for her arrival. She knew she'd be welcomed—wasn't that a familial requirement?

She'd been six years old when they'd immigrated to England. She'd been allowed to stand at the ship's rail, holding fast to her mother's hand. Full of fear, chilled to the bone, she'd shaken uncontrollably. Had she shed tears? She didn't remember. They'd made the journey to be with Grandfather, a man who lived only in stories and sketchy reminiscence.

Strange and sad, the recollections the cold pulled from her past.

There had been three brothers and a younger sister who'd all passed on—aunts and uncles who'd all lived without Katrina ever having known them well. Regular letters and occasional special gifts weren't the same as residing with her family.

But seeing her father reflected in Raisa's expression brought a new pain to Katrina's heart that had nothing to do with memory and everything to do with home—and how she'd been torn between two worlds.

That certain place where everything felt warm and cozy, albeit a little unfamiliar. Her memories, those of a six-year-old, were hazy and

full of recollections of her parents. It had been so long since she'd been in Russia. Had she allowed herself to paint a picture prettier than reality?

Was the strangling hold of ennui due to her forced return to Russia and her inevitable and painful separation from Mark Turnbow? It must be.

It shouldn't be.

She had hoped for this return trip for many years, well before knowing Mark. But thoughts of him lingered, tearing at her loyalties.

Katrina sighed, knowing what it was she wanted. She blew a quick breath against the cold glass and watched the fog spread in a circle. The fog turned crystalline, forming an odd shape. She could change her mood drastically if she stuck her tongue against the glass.

Ah, it was a distraction anyway. She smiled. At last.

The weather outside was anything but warm. Winter had fallen with a vengeance a week ago and the snow covered the streets to the knees in many places. Horses plodded along, straining against the added weight, plums of their hot breath spewed in great heaves; the powdery snow sprays launched even higher by their giant hooves. Two children stalked along in the broken track, shoulders hunched, burrowed inside their woolen coats, hats and gloves.

"Dearest, come away from the window. You'll catch your death," Aunt Raisa said.

Katrina pulled her shawl closer. Cold air stole through little cracks along the windowpane, showing her breath in heated little bursts. She reached out and scratched a capital M in the crusty glaze.

"It hasn't snowed like this in England for nearly ten years. I'd forgotten how dramatic a scene it can make."

"Return to Russia and you can enjoy such a scene every winter."

Katrina laughed, then allowed the thick curtain to fall back in place. "No, I think the weather is only confirmation I should stay as far from Russia as possible." After her penance was over, Peter Klee would have no further say in her destiny. Her being here was a way to prove to Peter she was outwardly sorry, but she *wasn't* sorry. Not in the least.

But who besides Mark could understand the giddy lust that had burst between them?

"One gets used to it. It helps to have a roaring fire and a lavish library," her aunt said.

Or three children to keep her entertained and watchful.

And a lover to keep her warm at night.

Katrina tried to think only of the day she was living and not about

what she had left behind. Two months had passed with stunning swiftness, partly because she'd coldly and efficiently blocked Mark's name, his face and his words. And his touch. Warm bricks in her bed weren't the same as a passionate lover.

By the time she returned to London, would he have found another woman or possibly be married?

Did Mark think about her at all?

Aunt Raisa and Katrina heard the tap at the sitting room door, and a servant entered carrying a small, round salver. There were several letters and notes, which Raisa plucked up and fanned through.

"Dear, there is a letter for you."

"From England?" She had received only a few letters from her sons, all short, uninformative missives that told her nothing of what she wanted to know. Ivan mentioned that he'd shot three brace of black grouse. Claud had signed his name. And dear Sergei said he loved her. Twice.

"No, no." Raisa flipped it from side-to-side.

Katrina accepted it with a strange lack of curiosity, then tossed it to a mahogany sideboard. The only letters she wanted would be properly stamped from London.

"Do you think they will postpone the winter festival?" Katrina wasn't sure she wanted to attend. Raisa had been shuffling her around St. Petersburg, to this ball and that musicale, all in the hopes of inducing Katrina to stay.

"My dear, it has stormed nearly every year on this day since my childhood, but it has never been cancelled. We will bundle in our best furs and dazzle every man who bothers to attend." Aunt Raisa had never married, so it was rather humorous to hear her plotting to attract potential suitors. Or was she determined to see her niece ensnared into a marriage that would mean her permanent return to St. Petersburg? Katrina wondered what Peter Klee would do, if such a circumstance occurred.

She hadn't thought of that! As their guardian, would Peter exercise control by demanding the children stay in England? No! She wasn't going to fall prostrate at some man's feet in the short time she was staying in Russia. She would remain single and alone the rest of her life if marriage meant being ripped from her children by a vindictive guardian.

Her Russian blood boiled at the thought.

Katrina was wildly torn, her emotions running roughshod over her intellect. She would be home soon. She must enjoy these days with her extended family. Who knew when she would ever return to Russia? Considering her longstanding plans, she was bemused by the

state of weariness that gripped her. Perhaps it was only because she had been forced into this situation. Katrina's real hope had been to share her country and her heritage with her boys. Peter had stolen that small gift from her.

She settled next to Raisa, tucking a thick, woolen lap robe over her legs. "I haven't skated in years...maybe ten years now. It was on the Thames." Samuel had taken them to the river, that year without a summer. Ivan was just old enough to skate on his own, but he clung to each of them in turn, laughing, red-cheeked and so sweet. "Hopefully I won't embarrass myself."

Going to the festival wasn't going to reduce the longing to return to England, but Aunt Raisa insisted they attend. Well, it was one way to endure the passage of time and to quell the ache she experienced each day and explained away each night.

"It is impossible to forget how to skate. You are not to worry. Someone will be there to catch you if you stumble." Aunt Raisa must have understood, because she patted Katrina's hand in sympathy.

Later, she dressed for the evening, rolling on two layers of wool stockings instead of her usual silks. Over her stockings, she slipped on her leather boots and laced them tight. The green woolen skirt and jacket fit well and matched the coat with the black fur collar and cuffs. She carried her gloves, scarf and hat down the stairs, feeling stiff with all the layers. And she was supposed to ice skate, trapped as she was?

If she could keep to her feet, perhaps some dashing Cossack could push her around the ice while her arms flailed. Or maybe she would remember how to skate, light of foot and elegant, whirling around enticing men willy-nilly.

However, it was more likely her second cousin twice removed, Stephan, would be there to bother her. He believed his antics were enduring and affectionate. In truth, he was far too insistent about certain intimate matters, her being a widow and all; he being a jackass, claiming the right of kinship.

She tolerated his overzealous attentions, because he treated every unmarried woman the same way. Not the virgins and marriage-minded, heaven forbid—those he assiduously avoided. However, had any woman turned to him and said yes, Stephan would have disappeared to Siberia.

He'd tried to kiss her in a darkened hallway at their last meeting. She'd dodged his advance by ducking under his arm and hurrying to the end of the hallway where there was light and safety. Stephan had laughed, the echo following her. Perhaps it was just a Russian mannerism, overtly affectionate and suggestive.



At the bottom of the carved staircase, a footman appeared, carrying a wooden box. Metal skates with leather straps poked out. While they were undoubtedly serviceable, Katrina already imagined the sinister toe-points and thin blades conspiring to embarrass her.

“Madam, the carriage will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Is it still snowing?”

“Only a bit.”

“And Aunt Raisa?” Just as Katrina mentioned her name, Raisa appeared at the top of the stairs dressed in a bright blue wool and a priceless white Crown sable outer coat. She held white leather gloves and a matching sable hat. She might yet trap an eligible suitor. “Oh, there you are.”

“And where else would I be?” At the bottom of the stairs, Raisa patted Katrina’s cheek. “You will be the belle of the ball tonight.”

“The ball? I thought we were just skating.”

Raisa clucked her tongue. “Oh, no, my dear. Skating will be the least of what will happen tonight. You will see.”

\* \* \* \* \*

St. Petersburg was built around a maze of natural lakes, rivers and ponds that drained into the Neva River and filled the Baltic Sea. Alexander’s Pond, located in a spacious and groomed private park near the edge of the city, was layered with ice, while patches of snow filled the rounded edges and an occasional puff of flakes skittered across the center. Bonfires were lit here and there, but already the ice held numerous skaters from the youngest child to the oldest grandparent, all seemingly impervious to the cold.

Katrina shuddered, then stomped her feet to keep her blood from coagulating in her veins.

Aunt Raisa had already found a bench and a servant assisted with the fastening of her skates. For all of Raisa’s bluster about the hardness of Russian stock, Katrina had noticed the crate of survival supplies that another servant had packed for the evening. Inside, copper hot water bottles covered with knitted warmers, two vessels of steaming black coffee and another of hot chocolate along with a flask containing vodka. Warm *knishes*, *blini* and *pelmeni* were wrapped in a linen cloth. They would not freeze or starve.

“Come, Katrina. There is no time to dawdle,” Raisa said.

“We have all night.”

“Start as you mean to go on. Wait much longer and you will convince yourself you cannot skate and the weather is too bitter.”

The wooden benches were already filled with young men tying on their skates and then boisterously pushing and shoving as they leapt

on to the solid, cold surface and skillfully circled the slow and less confident. It was all done in an effort to impress the young ladies who skated arm-in-arm with circumspect enthusiasm. Of course, they noticed the boys.

As Katrina took a seat near her aunt, one near a burning fire, she noticed many of her new friends and her aunt's confidantes also enjoying the cold, dark evening. She may as well skate. It would keep her warm and busy.

"Good eve, ladies." Stephan had found them and reached for Raisa, kissing her gloved hand with some chivalry, somehow not sneezing from the burst of fur tickling at his nose.

"Where is your father, pup?" Raisa asked.

"You know him, he cannot miss such an occasion. He mistakenly believes he is twenty again when he displays his prowess upon the ice." He turned his glacial gaze upon Katrina. "And you, my beauty, how are you? Your radiance shines as the Northern Lights."

Katrina presented her hand, and Stephan held her fingertips before placing a feather-light kiss upon her covered knuckles. "Be careful, flatterer."

He bestowed a devilish smile, and yes, he was a handsome charmer. "Or what? Will you call upon Baba Yaga to carry me away to the forest?"

Baba Yaga. The legendary witch, out to thwart the desires of one's heart. And not only that, but any achievement one set their sights upon. The fickle Baba Yaga. Who knew why she rewarded some and punished others?

"Fie! Fie! Would it do any good? I fear you would only return, more wicked than ever."

He pressed a hand to his chest. "You wound me."

Katrina shivered a little and glanced about the clearing. The lights cast eerie shadows against the naked tree branches and revealed a few stragglers still arriving to the festival. There in the dark, she could see a lone man, his great coat sweeping about his legs, hesitant to approach the growing crowds. She understood. Skating required confidence and skill, plus the ability to chat endlessly about the most mundane things. Perhaps it was worse than being trapped at an indoor ball.

The servant took up a second pair of skates, but Stephan plucked them away. He knelt in front of Katrina and gripped her shod foot, fastening each of the skates securely.

"Your father is much the same, Stephan. Words flowing from his tongue like a mountain spring. Your mother, poor woman, had to watch as he spread his enchantments to any ear who would listen.

Scoundrels all.” Raisa admonished. Her smile belied her words. She was as much as a flirt as Stephan. Perhaps it was a family trait.

Katrina was a bit jealous of their easy play. In England, she’d always felt different, and consequently, she’d been very reserved with her acquaintances. Maybe that is why she’d failed to reveal her true feelings to Mark.

“Mother was immune to Father’s words,” Stephan said.

“As am I to yours,” Katrina added. “You should practice on someone with a warm heart.” She tested her steps, stomping her skates against the snow-covered ground. “Are you ready, Aunt?”

“You two go on ahead. I see Count Pushkin coming my way.”

“A wealthy man is exactly what you need.”

“Who gives a fig about wealth? He is eight years younger than I am.” Aunt Raisa winked.

Laughter still on their lips, Katrina allowed Stephan to lead her toward the pond, and with ginger steps and shaky limbs, began the first turn about the ice. Already numerous skate lines marred the smooth glaze.

Her ankles wobbled a bit, and she was thankful for the support of her flirty cousin, but by the second turn, she felt confident. Unfortunately, Stephan wasn’t about to lose his grip. The light tug of her hand was met with a gentle squeeze, keeping her firmly at his side.

They were silent, listening to the happy chatter around them and the *swoosh* and *kish-kish* of blades flashing by them. He held her hands. His right arm behind her back, clutching her right hand, also folded behind her. Their left hands were lightly entwined. The whole effect was one of complete intimacy. And for some reason, tonight she didn’t mind, even considering all of today’s negative musings.

“I know this isn’t the place to ask, Katrina, but I would—”

She turned a panicked gaze to see he looked back, his brows raised and a one-sided smile upon his face. “You’re right. This isn’t the place.”

“You don’t know what I was going to ask.”

“I have an idea.”

“Oh?”

“I am not staying in Russia past this spring.”

“As you’ve said on numerous occasions,” he said, with a dose of frustration. “I don’t necessarily believe you.”

*Swoosh. Kish-kish.*

She forced a tight-lipped smile.

“I do have much to offer a woman such as yourself, family

connections notwithstanding. It seems inconceivable that my proposal would be rejected out of hand. I can do so much for you.”

“Stephan, I have sons.”

“We can spend winters in Spain. Summers on the Black Sea. I would spare no expense. My connections to the tsar are consequential. If you required it, I could have a position of some importance, which could also benefit your sons. I would be a good father to them.”

“There are many young women with respectable families to whom you might attach yourself. And surely you want your own children.”

“Of course, and you’ve proven your worth in that regard.”

“My worth? As a brood mare?”

“My dearest.”

She found an opportunity and slid to a stop at the edge of the ice. “Thank you, but I shouldn’t monopolize your time this evening. Not when there are so many looking for husbands.”

“I meant no insult.”

“None taken.”

“Yet you are angry.”

“I am angry because you will not listen to me. Now, if you will excuse me, I wish to find another partner who will not badger me so.”

She pushed off, sliding toward a large group of revelers, but Stephan wouldn’t give up his pursuit and skated up next to her.

The sense of displacement occurred at the same time Stephan’s eyes bulged. He reached for her arm, but she flailed to keep her balance.

Time slowed as cold crept up her body. She careened against the others. Screams pierced the night air. She glanced down, toward the source of the cold, to see the crack in the ice. Water gushed up through a widening ravine, soaking her feet and legs. The skirts of her dress had turned dark and heavy, dragging like a lead weight.

Another lurch and the ice gave way completely. The fall was long and seemed to last forever. There was no one to grab hold of; they were jostling against each other, each hoping their neighbor could help. There was no help. They were all descending into the same dark hell.

They plunged into the ice-cold water together. She gulped some air and clenched her eyes shut.

How deep was the pond? Would her feet ever touch the cold, silty bottom? The bodies writhed next to hers, gripping and tearing at her. She clawed for purchase, her arms waving, striving to get to the surface.

She grabbed as she was being grabbed. Was it someone trying to

help her? Or someone desperate to save themselves, and her body was the only thing to hang on to?

Stephan? Where was he? He would not leave her to die by drowning. He wouldn't. Not unless he was thrashing beneath the ice, attempting to save his own life.

The black depths trapped her; her clothes sprang tighter than ropes about her body, weighing her down. She must have air. Just a bit. Anything to fill the painful emptiness burning in her lungs.

She could swim. She had learned to swim as a child on the beaches of southern England. She kicked her legs, only to feel the freeze work further into her body, her veins.

There! Solid footing. She pushed hard upward, feeling the sting of movement pass through her. She kicked, weakly. Ineffectively, it seemed.

Somehow, she breached the surface and sucked in a lungful of life-saving air. She had no time to scream for help, no time to open her eyes before she was pulled back under. How did she know that? This time the water covering her face was a wash of warmth.

It wasn't true, though. There were no happy memories to ease her into death. She had to search for the names of her sons: Ivan. Claud. Sergei. A peaceful swell filled her heart. She might die, but her sons would live.

She wanted only one thing: one last breath.

And the warm touch of her lover. Mark. Mark knew how to bring her to life. To bring her warmth and contentment.

The bitter cold surrounded her and no longer felt so shocking. She embraced it and a hint of warm spread from her middle outward.

Then she felt death. Sharp pain spiked through her head, and the roots of her hair screamed. A dagger-like agony tore through her arm, the same one she'd wounded weeks ago.

And that was all she remembered.

## Chapter Twelve

Mark really had only two choices—live without the woman he loved or do something about it.

Once the decision was made, once he stepped out his front door and began the journey to St. Petersburg, he'd carried on with singular purpose. Katrina must know how he felt, and it could not wait until she returned to London.

The sad part was he'd been oblivious to her attempts to suggest they might have more together. All was clear in hindsight. She'd been the obvious and perfect woman for him. From the first.

After the swing accident, she had been able to put him aside. He didn't blame her; there was certainly more risk for her than him. If he made his feelings clear; if he did it before she had a chance to forget him completely...

He'd arrived a few days ago, familiarizing himself with the city and its people. He made open inquiries about the Angersteins and more subtle ones about Katrina Klee.

Katrina had made an impression on those who claimed to know her. The White English Rose, they'd said. Mark thought it pleasantly humorous since Katrina was so sure she was still Russian to the bone. She'd acclimated well to the social norms and proper etiquette required of an English noble woman. Would her heritage reclaim her soul now that she was in her homeland?

He'd penned a note to her this morning, trying to explain, requesting an audience, but he'd heard nothing back. He wasn't necessarily alarmed by this. She was probably shocked. Probably examining how she felt about his abrupt, unannounced visit.

He wouldn't blame her for any feelings she might have. He'd had time to come to terms with his sentiments on the long journey by sea, trapped in his cabin with nothing but thoughts of Katrina to keep him company.

Before he proposed marriage, though, he must see for himself.

Did Katrina belong in Russia or was she destined to return, firmly attached to sons and home, and hopefully, with an English lord for a husband? He'd learned enough to know what she was doing and when—she was an Angerstein, after all.

He left the warmth of his lodgings and tromped down unfamiliar streets toward the skating festival.

The evening was clear and cold, the northern stars bright against the backdrop of the darkened city while the celebrated pond was

bustling with the city's hardest citizens. At the far side of the bean-shaped area, a stone bridge connected the two sides at the middle.

Mark's greatcoat was insufficient for providing warmth whilst he stood alone amongst the trees. Had he a pair of skates, he could be on the ice, thoroughly warmed from the activity and the joy of chasing Katrina around the frozen slabs of the pond.

If she wasn't being escorted by a handsome Cossack with arms as flexible as an octopus.

There she was, looking radiant but rubicund. His gaze followed her easy pace around the ice. Held securely by her partner, Katrina skated with practiced ease.

Every day he woke with an enthusiasm that died by sunset—by suffocation, by denial, by lack of hope. It was a slow, miserable dying to which only Katrina could bring new life. Seeing her with another man only confirmed what was plainly before him.

Living without her was a painful alternative to his real hope.

He was not going to proclaim an undying love, though his heart bounced a bit irregularly when he thought of her.

Such claims seemed too convenient. He could have made that declaration at any time over the length of their liaison. *I love you.*

Was it too simple to say *I want to spend every day of my life with you?*

The truth was simple like that.

An unfamiliar sound disrupted the festivities.

The quaint scene below changed quickly and he was moving before he fully understood what was happening. The shouts in Russian reached his ears. While he didn't comprehend the words, he knew the content. *Help! Hurry!*

The second *crack* sounded like a loud whip and panicked screams followed. The group seemed to hang in mid-air before they moved with one scary lunge.

"Katrina!" he yelled. Sliding, arms flapping, he hurried forward. He reached the edge of the pond.

He grabbed the arms of two children who were working their way toward the catastrophe. "Stay off the ice," he yelled. They cowered at his words but understood and turned back to the safety of the shore.

The sight in front of him left him breathless. Heads and bodies bobbing then disappearing in the water. First confusion, then action. He worried that those trying to help would make things worse. That the rescuers would need to be rescued.

The ice was dangerous, but he proceeded across, as did many others. He waved them away. "Go back." They wanted to help, as he

did. Already several men were laying on the ice, legs spread, arms reaching into the cold water. Others stood behind them, securing them so they didn't fall in also.

Scarves were unwound. Ropes appeared and were slung across the dark precipice with unnerving accuracy.

Horses, carriages and snow sleds were coming near the pond edge. The yelling continued until it felt like his hearing had gone bad.

Another group cowered nearby. He stopped to herd them toward the shore. "Please get off the ice!" he yelled. "It's not safe!"

He felt useless amongst the muddle, but finally tore off his coat and lunged toward the gaping black hole. Someone had been plucked from the water, coughing and choking, water streaming from her person. Mark wrapped his coat about her. Chills shook her so hard, they passed right through Mark too.

He hoisted her up and carried her toward the shore and the waiting help. Another wrapped her in a blanket and Mark returned for another body.

It was an eerie silence. The screams had died down. There were still shouts, but the night and the tragedy seemed to dull his senses. Men mouthed instructions he did not understand. The flailing bodies seemed to gyrate in a slow, macabre dance.

One by one bodies were dragged to safety—some half frozen, out of their minds. Others unmoving. Limp and weak with the effort to swim. Their frozen arms and legs unable to support the weight of the body.

Where was Katrina? Had she been plucked from the cold depths already?

He had come with his high-minded determination, and yet he had not been able to save her. *Please, dear God, let someone have found her and pulled her to safety. Let her live.*

Let her live.

Just as the carriages and sleds had arrived, they disappeared into the cold night. He shivered, his coat missing and his clothes wet and weighty. He stood alone on the ice; a few stragglers remained on the shore.

His breath, pumping from his lungs, formed a frosty halo around his head. He didn't move, he couldn't move, until an elderly woman met him with a blanket and uttered some kind words as she threw it around his shoulders. He grabbed the woolen covering and gripped the edges, trying to keep out the cold. He knew enough to say *thank you*.

A deep shudder passed through him. He forced his legs to carry him back to his lodgings, the trip a forgettable misery. This one awful



night was a deep and dark contrast to the halcyon days at the house at Henley-on-Thames and their encounters at his private home.

No one had died. There was that. His heart had nearly given out, though, watching her flail, then disappear. He understood what it was to be a ghost. To watch such a calamitous event and to be unable to do anything of real value.

He could not lift his arm or remove his shirt until he stood close to the fire for a few minutes. The servant who'd brought in the tub and water stared wide-eyed at his condition.

If the need to be with Katrina was strong before, the shock of near death made it imperative.

By the time he had warmed himself with a hot bath and a change of clothes, Mark's decision was clear. If Katrina was anywhere, it would be at her aunt's home. This was confirmed when he arrived; two other carriages were out front and the house was lit with candles.

He stepped from the carriage, shivering as the night air blew in harsh, quick bursts. He wasn't sure that he had entirely thawed yet. Snow still covered the steps up, but it had been snowing off and on since Mark arrived. It was going to take a winter in Spain for him to recover from this hell on earth.

"I am here to see Baroness Katrina Klee," he said when the door opened. Inside, he could see the bustle of servants carrying water buckets and blankets and hurrying from kitchen to servants' stairs down a short hall.

The servant shrugged, but gestured for Mark to follow. Whether the servant understood or not was another matter. He was led to an empty sitting room. Would it be the height of rudeness to follow the servants to whichever room they were dispatched?

"Katrina Klee," Mark said again.

The servant wagged a fat, chastising finger at Mark, then said something in Russian. Instead of obeying, Mark followed him to the door, for which Mark earned a stern glance. The servant instructed Mark further, but was interrupted by a woman who Mark hoped was Katrina's aunt. When she turned her gaze to him, he saw a resemblance to Katrina.

"Sir? You are here to see Katrina?" She spoke with a superior air like that of royalty.

"If I may? Is she well? I was at the fesitival. I saw what happened," he explained quickly.

"You know Katrina?"

"Yes. From England." Hell, how did he explain his indecision, his skulking, his appearance late at night. "I'm sorry. I am Mark Turnbow, the Earl of Compton. Is she well?" he finished.

“Raisa Angerstein,” she said. He took her hand and executed a short bow. “Come with me. I am sure she will want to see you.” So, had Katrina mentioned him to her family?

“Is...was anyone mortally wounded?” He’d been confident no one had died at the pond, but perhaps...

Such a scramble of people and chaos, he wasn’t sure if anyone would know until the light of day tomorrow.

“From what I could tell, and what we have heard in the past hour, all were saved.”

“Good. That is good.” The steps they climbed seemed less steep, but the exertion and the excitement had his heart beating an enthusiastic cadence.

“She may be sleeping,” Raisa whispered. She tapped lightly on the door then pushed through. Mark could not see her right away; a servant was bent over Katrina, tucking a blanket around her.

Raisa had reached her. Mark heard the whispered words, “There is someone to see you.”

“Oh, Auntie, if it is Stephan, please send him away,” Katrina whispered in English. “He should be in bed, enjoying your best vodka. We practically died tonight.” Her voice cracked.

Mark felt the punch as if a fist had been planted at his solar plexus.

“No, it’s not him. It’s the earl.”

“The earl?”

“Yes. There, there. Stay where you are. You are in no condition to get out of bed.”

“I’m fine.” She coughed, directly contradicting her statements.

“You are chilled to the bone. Amongst other ills. Being more tea,” Raisa commanded one of the servants. “He can wait until morning, dear. He won’t mind.”

“But I will,” Katrina said. Her determined words brought a smile to his face. He took a quiet step into her bedroom, bringing her into view. The covers were drawn to her chin, with several pillows fluffed around her. Whatever wounds she had suffered, whatever trauma, she was still herself. He watched as Katrina tugged at the blanket. She hadn’t tried to glance in his direction, though. “You may all leave now,” she said.

There was an *except for you* statement that remained unspoken. Everyone in the room understood. Raisa and the lady’s maid departed. Raisa winked at him as she walked by.

Mark was feeling better by the minute.

When the door *clicked* behind them, Katrina finally turned her

piercing gaze to him.

"The earl? That made it sound like you know more than one," Mark said.

"Maybe I do." She took a deep breath; he let the one he'd been holding escape, in a lift of the shoulders.

"Your timing his particularly poor, Mark. Here I am abed, chilled to the bone, as my aunt said. Perhaps even dying. No. I am dying." She coughed again and the shook before burrowing even further into her nest.

"I'm sure if I crawled in there with you, I could help."

"I'm sure you will do no such thing," she said primly. "Not in my aunt's home." She fussed with her covers again, her fists gripping the satin and wool of the heavy edges. "So, what are you doing here?"

"Here in Russia? Or here at your aunt's house?"

"Here. With me."

"A funny story, that." He strolled to the edge of the bed and sat, about where her hip was, there in the middle of the overstuffed mattress. Too well covered by his estimation, but then she'd just been pulled from ice-cold water and lucky to be alive. Perhaps another blanket would be best. Then he noticed her arm, again in a sling.

"Baroness," he said, trying to convey all of his fear and relief and devotion. He rubbed his knuckle lightly across the back of her hand. "First things first, Katrina. You scared the life from me tonight."

"All of us, I think."

"How are you?"

"Under the circumstances, I'm feeling lucky, but somewhat battered."

"I am so happy you are safe."

"But how did you know? And why are you here? When did you get here?" With each question, her voice seemed to raise a degree, until she ended up coughing again. She reached for a cup at her bedside and swallowed back a relieving drink. Chamomile tea, he thought.

Mark placed his hand on hers, and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "I was there, at the fesitval. I arrived in St. Petersburg a few days ago. I sent you a letter."

"You did?"

"Yes. But I was full of indecision about what to do. You put me off so thoroughly in London, but I can't let you go. I won't."

"You won't?"

"Never."

"Never?"

“Ever,” he said.

He gripped her fingers and squeezed lightly. “When I saw you fall through the ice, my indecision crystalized into firm resolve. I want you to be my wife. Losing you seemed like the greatest tragedy of my life. And right then, I knew it to be true.

“I mean it. I wish for you to be my wife, Katrina. I want no one else.”

She shivered and sank deeper into the covers. “I’m not shuddering because of your proposal. I really think my bones turned to icicles.”

“Do you know who pulled you from the water? He must be thanked.”

“It was chaos, Mark. Someone grabbed my hair; someone else my arm. One moment I thought I was dead. I think it was when the water started to feel warm that I knew it was over. Then the jerking, arm-breaking grab and I was out of the water, bundled up and hustled home by a complete stranger in an open carriage.

“My hair looked like frozen Medusa. So now you know the truth, I am just a *klots*.”

“But you are my *klots*.” He leaned forward a bit and pressed a kiss to her lips. “I hope that makes you warm.”

She lifted her arm and pushed back the sleeve of her nightgown. “I’ve a bruise here,” she said. He kissed that too, then saw the extent of the blue-and-black splotch. He swore seeing the damage and imagining what else could have actually happened. He kissed it again.

“All better?”

“Maybe. Did you bring me a ring?”

Mark laughed. “And that is how you know if a woman is really ailing or not. You need not worry. You can attend me when I find the largest jewel in St. Petersburg. Are you going to marry me?”

“No. But we can be betrothed for a few months until I return to London. I must enjoy the moment, as it were.”

“I’m not leaving without you.” He glanced toward the window to see several snowflakes, dancing in delight over his misery. “Though this weather makes me think twice about staying.”

“Me too. I would much rather have a depressed, chilly, mist-soaked London day any time. I am fine. Truly.” She smiled at him. One that warmed him on this cold, chaotic night.

“I love you, Katrina.”

“You’re not just saying that so I sleep well tonight?” she asked.

“I expect the hounds of hell won’t be able to wake you, once you close your eyes, but if it helps: I. Love. You.” He pressed another kiss to her lips. “I’ve missed you terribly.”

“Me? Or...?” She wagged her brows in suggestion.

“That too. And if your ring is big enough, perhaps you won’t make me wait until we get back to London for the *or*?”

“Aunt Raisa will be guarding me. You’ll have to be extra careful in your pursuit.”

“And speaking of pursuit, who was the boy chasing you around the ice pond tonight?”

“*That boy* is my cousin, Stephan. A regular nuisance. He’s going to be disappointed I’ve accepted your proposal. He chases every eligible woman as if he’s the only man in St. Petersburg.”

“Good. We should let him know you’ve accepted a better offer.”

“He’s here if you’d like to visit his room. Recuperating three doors down. He truly was concerned about my health and insisted upon following me here.”

“What if I tell him and he has a relapse? My God, I can’t believe we are joking about this,” Mark said.

“What else is there to do? Our angels were watching out for us.” Katrina yawned, wide enough to crack her jaw. “I’m glad you are here though. So happy.”

“I’m sorry it took so long. Will you take breakfast with me if I promise not to arrive before ten?”

“Of course.” She yawned again and her lids drooped. “I’ll dream about being the Countess of Compton,” she said. “It will be a lovely dream.”

Mark glanced toward the tray beside Katrina’s bed. He reached for the decanter and poured a draught into her teacup. “Drink this.”

She obeyed, taking a few deep drinks.

“Your dream will be no better than mine, because the Countess of Compton will be my wife.”

She reached for him, her fingers just skimming his bristled cheek before sleep overcame her. Mark waited a few more moments, staring at her. His beautiful Katrina.

Why were men such fools when it came to love?

## Chapter Thirteen

About a week later, Katrina being herself and being in love with Mark Turnbow, was most anxious to find a way to be alone with him. In a faraway land, that might seem like a romantic and endearing adventure, but she was finding it tedious and infuriating to escape from Aunt Raisa's clutches. As if Katrina was a prim virgin, in need of constant surveillance.

Carriages were no place to enjoy sexual congress. And one's bum in the open air was not very dignified or practical during a Russian winter.

Aunt Raisa seemed to be home anytime Mark came calling, and welcomed him, flirting outrageously, but denying Katrina the same chance.

So, Katrina decided she would have a relapse, just as Aunt Raisa was heading out to church on Sunday morning at the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God Russian Orthodox Church. Katrina had been in awe the first time she'd return to the church with its magnificent onion-shaped cupolas and many porticos. The entire household was usually whisked away for the ecclesiastical ritual, so Katrina's only task was to get a message to Mark well before everyone returned home.

A quick note and a single coin had a young boy off and running to Mark's lodgings, braving the blistering cold in spite of a deceptively full sun and blue sky. Mark knocked at her door twenty minutes later.

"How much time do we have?" He gathered her in his arms. She gripped his lapel and went to her toes in order to give him a proper greeting.

"Since I'm supposed to be ill, I think you should stay in my room all day and sneak out tonight." Mark was freshly shaven and smelled like a pinewood forest. His cheeks were ruddy red, making him look like a young boy out on a winter adventure. His cap was fur-lined and his black hair curled from beneath it.

"You've had too much time to plan this little adventure."

"An eternity. Hurry."

She laughed. They skipped up the stairs, giddy as two young kids in a field. And once behind her closed door, he pressed into her, his loins hot and hard against her stomach. She tossed his cap aside. "Hurry. Hurry."

The room was slightly chilled, as were most rooms in St. Petersburg, even though there was a cheery fire burning in the hearth. She was a guest in her aunt's home, but her room was lavish and

comfortable, the bed soft and wide.

He ran his hand along her cheek until his fingers slid into the strands of her hair. Katrina worked at his cravat. "I am dying."

"You're not, but you soon will be," he said. He opened his mouth over hers and they enjoyed something other than a chaste kiss. When they broke away, they panted.

So many weeks had passed since they'd shared a proper shag. Oh, how she wanted him.

"The bed," she demanded.

Their mouths fused again and Mark began a slow waltz backward toward the soft, wide expanse waiting to carry their shared weight. When her knees hit the mattress, they fell back together, Mark bracing one hand so he wouldn't squash her.

Her legs fell open and he settled between, fully clothed. "Lord, I have to get out of these clothes. How am I supposed to do my duty?"

He rolled from her and jumped to his feet. Katrina stared at him as he began removing his clothing, one item at a time.

"You could be my valet for a few minutes," he suggested.

"No. I want to watch."

"You tease. I am helpless, neatly bound up, and you want to watch?" He finally freed himself from the cravat.

Katrina picked it up and wound it in her hands. "We may need this later," she said.

He raised a questioning brow while he worked at the studs on his shirt, then threw it aside.

"Oh, I forgot to lock the door," she exclaimed, and tried to roll from the bed.

"Not so fast, kitten. We have business to attend. And it won't take long," he said, and grabbed her ankle. He was bare-chested, but still wore his trousers and boots. When she relaxed back into the soft mounds of the bed, he worked at his falls, finally exposing his erection.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

She reached for him and pulled him on top of her, spreading her legs and hiking up her skirts. "Like the air," she said.

He reared up on two hands, bracing himself, and canted his hips. She was slippery and he slid into her with ease. And he slid deep.

"Ah," she said, barely able to breathe. The fullness of him caused a feral lust to well in her. She clasped his ass and held him. "I've wanted you for so long."

She opened her eyes to see he stared back. "And I you," he said.

Mark withdrew and thrust again, sending a shock through her

limbs and heightening her senses. She pressed her face into the curve of his neck and inhaled.

His back and shoulders were muscled and hard, as she remembered. Nothing about him had changed. Not really. She caressed the curves of his arms, his skin warm and dry and prickly, with little wiry hairs.

She'd wanted him fast and hard, and maybe that was what he expected too, but he took his time, taking her up hills and plunging her into valleys. She pushed back against him too, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts.

With one hand, he cupped the back of her head and plied kisses to her mouth and cheeks while slicking his tongue behind her ear and down her neck. The induced delirium made her hum and moan.

She wasn't the only one so affected. He groaned and shuddered as his excitement grew.

Katrina wasn't ready to peak, but Mark had reached his limits and she welcomed it. He'd never been a selfish lover, making up any inadequacies when she was unsatisfied.

He arched, his body tight, as he released into her. With another surge and groan, he bit at his lips and grimaced as if it were the greatest pain instead of the greatest pleasure.

She expected him to apologize for his impatience.

Instead he withdrew. Katrina felt the tickle of liquid.

Mark stared at her before he worked backwards and lowered his head between her thighs. The first kiss was soft. Then he pushed her legs wide and began providing private pleasures, so intimate that one could not say such things without blushing and stammering.

The shocking effect had her wriggling to get away from him and dying to reach that pinnacle of joy. She wanted to relish every wicked touch. She wanted to hold his head there and guide him.

Her body was no longer soft and pliant; she tensed beneath his assault, trying to find release. To find pleasure. His tongue glided around the puffed-up nub. When he sucked it into his mouth, she screamed. She soared, riding a plateau of perfect, intense hunger—hunger for a lifetime of this joy; hunger for Mark.

Only she came crashing to earth again as her body contracted, first with hard pulses. Had he put his fingers into her? Oh God. The contractions pulled and sucked at him, lasting for long moments until they faded and left her replete and weak.

He turned her to her side and pushed her top leg forward before setting his mouth to her a second time. Already aroused, it took no time at all before she was in the throes of a second climax, one stronger than before. She turned her head into her pillow and moaned



with each pulsing contraction. Her body no longer hers, but Mark's, as he was able to command her with each purposeful touch.

They lay in a drunken stupor, limbs entwined, their breaths mingled.

A sudden loud banging tore them apart.

"Oh no. They are home already." Katrina nearly jumped from the bed and hurried to the door. Mark stood as well, only to shuck his boots and trousers. After locking the door, she glanced at him. "You can't be naked."

"Can't I?" He climbed into the bed. "Come join me. They will think you are sleeping. You can call for tea later."

"You don't know my aunt Raisa. I have to keep her unsuspecting."

"Come to bed," he insisted. "And shouldn't you be in your bedclothes?"

"Not yet. I have to hide these." She gathered his discards, folded them properly and then hid them inside a large armoire. "Oh, and I will order some tea and honey. Does my voice sound scratchy? As if I am ill?"

"No."

She fluffed up her hair, grabbed her thick robe and tied it up. "I have to deflect her curiosity."

"Then you'll come back to bed?"

"Yes, of course." Katrina decided she hadn't thought out her plan very well, but she did stop to smile at him. "I'm so glad you came."

"It's always good to come. And more than once? Well, that's my specialty."

"Mark, what are we going to do when we go back to London?"

"Well, we'll marry, of course. At the first opportunity. We could marry here in St. Petersburg." She sat next to him, but he pulled her into his embrace. "What is it?"

"My sons. They should see me marry. I don't want it to seem like some shoddy affair."

"St. George's then? In front of all the *ton*?"

"Maybe not St. George's. Just our family and intimate friends. What do you think?"

"But your family is here." He wound his finger around a ribbon at the front of her robe. "Unless you want to marry twice. Once here and once in London."

"Is that legal?"

"Per se? I shouldn't think it anyone's business but our own."

"Hm, and if we get married, the sooner we can go home," she said.

“We can go home now.”

“I should call for a servant. Maybe that will keep Aunt Raise at bay. We can have a bit to eat.”

“Katrina, why do you think you can’t go home?”

“It’s nothing. Not really.”

He sat up and stuffed a few pillows behind his back. “Katrina? There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“You can probably imagine. Their uncle Peter was not happy about our liaison and thought I was shaming myself. You saw his reaction. He forced me to go away, for six months or so, thus inhibiting my feelings for you and preventing any chance for scandal.”

“So, you didn’t really leave me?”

“Mark, I love you. Why would I leave you unless I had to? My sons are the only things I love more, and Peter threatened to take them from me.”

“The bastard. How could you not have trusted me enough to help?”

“I thought we were just engaged in a tryst, not anything permanent, even though that is what I wanted. I know it’s different for men, but I knew right away I was going to love you. That I was lost.”

“What are the terms of his guardianship?”

Katrina explained her small bit of knowledge. “I do understand Peter’s concern.”

“His interference in your life is quite inappropriate, you must know that.”

“But how was I to stop it?”

“Indeed. Let’s request the tea and biscuits. We’ll decide what to do soon enough.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Katrina, I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, but this is one thing in which I can help. Being married to an earl is no small thing. For that matter, being a countess isn’t either. A barrister and a proper court will have his guardianship amended in no time.” He caressed her knee. “Do not worry for another moment. I’ll have you and your title and your husband back to England before you know it, and your sons happily reunited with you.”

Someone rattled the doorknob. “Katrina? Can I get you anything, dear?” her aunt asked.

“Under the covers! Now!” Katrina whispered.

“I think you aunt isn’t so opposed to naked flesh as you might think.” She hit him with a pillow, then pressed a finger to her lips.

Katrina fussed with her hair again, pulled her robe tight, then

clutched a square handkerchief and pressed it to her nose. She peeked out through the small crack of her door. She braced her foot against the bottom so her aunt wouldn't inadvertently burst in.

"Will you join us for breakfast? Stephan returned with us. He appears most anxious to press his suit."

"He's a flirt." She pretended a sneeze. "He's here to dazzle you just as much as he thinks I'll blush and stammer at his witticisms. Auntie, I cannot see him today of all days. Because I'm still ill," she added quickly.

"He's worried, you know, about your English lord." Raisa glanced around Katrina, so she closed the door a few inches more.

Mark had gotten out of bed and came in behind Katrina. He was busy lifting her robe's swath of material from her backside. The soft crinkle of skirts sounded like cannon blast to Katrina. She kicked back and connected with some part of his body.

"Maybe my English lord should be worried about Stephan."

Raisa laughed. "I'll have Nannette bring up a tray for you. And for Mark, too?"

"Auntie! Mind your own business," Katrina whispered.

"I'm Russian. All business in my house is my business."

\* \* \* \* \*

The wedding was a surprisingly lavish affair given that Katrina and Aunt Raisa had only a week to prepare. In the coldest part of winter, ice sculptures were a *de rigueur* and Raisa had several made, including a brown bear, a carriage, and Cupid with his arrows.

A seamstress had arrived on the day after their announcement, and every morning since, cutting and measuring and fitting this trim and adding this flounce. The silk was glorious, the lace expensive. The Russian artic fox fur was an extravagance but something Raisa had insisted on, as her own mother had worn it on her wedding day.

Katrina's grandmother? She had no real recollection of the woman, but being in Russia again caused many of her memories to stir, especially as she walked toward Mark standing at the royal doors in the middle of the nave.

Mark had even learned the vows in Russian, which brought tears to her eyes because he had not told her before the ceremony. The crowning, a tradition in Russia where crowns were held over Katrina's and Mark's head while the priest recited prayers and blessings, was solemn and beautiful. The moment the crown was over Mark's head, she grew teary again and thankful they had decided to marry here and now. Then he kissed both her cheeks before pressing a chaste kiss to her lips.

That part wasn't traditional, but it was perfect.

The snow prevented any lengthy travel, so they stayed at Mark's lodgings for a few weeks, loving by firelight and rarely coming out of their private cocoon except to eat.

Furs were piled near the hearth, and lying naked beneath them and next to Mark was a luxury she'd not soon forget.

Outside, the wind howled, but they lay entwined, hands clasped, Katrina's head nestled against his shoulder and neck.

"Tell me about your family. Your life. Everything. Before, we never talked about such things," she said.

"I feel like you know everything about me. All that's important, anyway."

"But it's those small things that paint the true picture. Did you have a dog when you were a boy?"

"Two of them. Dale and Blackie. The sweetest Staffies a boy could ask for. They were family dogs, of course, so I couldn't claim they were completely mine. I took them everywhere in London. And when we went to the country for holiday, we'd swim in the lake and fish and climb hills. It was a grand boyhood."

"Maybe we will need a Staffie in our home."

"Your boys will love them."

"They're our boys now," she said.

"Will they mind this sudden change? A new stepfather? A man about the house to frown at their antics and scold their misbehaviors?"

"I do enough scolding. But maybe they will enjoy the swimming, the fishing and the climbing with you."

"And the dog?"

"Of course."

The fire snapped and an ember flew across the room to land near the foot of the bed.

"I don't want ours to be just a glowing ember, Mark," she said. "A bright flame that burns itself out."

"And what do you suggest? It is a rather common problem amongst the *ton* set."

"It happened with me and Samuel. I gather it happened with you and Susannah."

He grunted in the affirmative, but pulled her closer.

"Maybe if we had a child of our own," she suggested. Haltingly.

"Hm. I just assumed you were no longer interested in bearing a child at your age, with your sons."

"I am not so old," she said. "For you, I would. Most certainly."

“And would that keep the flame bright?”

“Maybe. The effort to make a child won’t hurt.”

“I want a child, Katrina, but not at the risk of your life. Seeing you fall through that ice terrified me. I got to see what my life would be like without you, and I don’t want to experience that again.”

“Let’s stay here forever,” she said. “Just like this.”

“If we don’t move soon, they are going to find our bones.”

“Yes, but we’ll be locked in an embrace, and they’ll encase us at the British Museum as an example for all the world, such as those excavations at Pompeii.”

“You don’t have high expectations at all.” She glanced up at him. “All right, I admit I do too,” Mark said.

“Good.” Katrina rolled and reached for the bottle of wine. “In Russia, there is no better way to seal a promise than with a drink. To us. Forever.” She drank back a swig then handed the bottle to Mark.

“To us. Forever.” He swallowed a drink and then said, “You have my heart and it is full of love, only for you.” He took another drink then dribbled the wine over her chest. Setting the wine aside, he bent over her and sipped from her breasts, her stomach and the lovely expanse of her skin.

But spring eventually arrived, icicles melted from the overhangs and fences, with the drip, drip plopping against wood, stone and metal. The snow turned to slush and great heaping piles of dirt and flotsam gathered at street corners and alleys where it had collected all winter. And large drays, pulling heavy carts shot dirty, icy water in every direction, angering passersby.

Mark and Katrina, bundled in their heaviest coats, journeyed toward home. She had turned to look back at her homeland as the ship left port, tears pooling in her eyes and sliding down her cheeks.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back. And maybe everyone I know will be gone by then.”

“Maybe. But you’ll still have me, and I’ll still be burning for you.”

## Chapter Fourteen

"It's a scandal, that's what it is." Peter Klee tossed the newspaper he was reading and scattered the pages across the floor. He threw himself against the back of his chair, petulant. Fisting one hand, he tapped his knuckle against his teeth.

Katrina was prepared for Peter's anger. Mark had given her advice, saying it was unwise to poke this bear just now, even insisting on accompanying her. She'd convinced him that she should see Peter alone and explain what *would* happen. She had to do this herself, so Mark took time to visit Susannah's family instead, to softly break the news of their marriage, which seemed appropriate given that the family mourning was not complete.

"What is scandalous about a wedding announcement and reading of the banns?" Katrina asked.

"Everyone knows he went after you like a hound chasing a hare. To St. Petersburg, for the love of—"

"Everyone doesn't know! They never do. They speculate and gossip and, where it concerns me, you are quick to believe every falsehood."

"So, you are saying he wasn't in St. Petersburg with you? Samuel would be very disappointed by your behavior. He did everything he could to elevate you in society. And you forget your sons."

"And I am doing more for them by marrying an earl."

"An earl. One who barely has a pot to piss in."

"Peter!"

"My apologies," he said without real repentance and with little thought. "You understand how this has caught me off guard."

"It is none of your business. And you had to know I would eventually marry," she said. Had she made a mistake coming alone?

"The boys will, of course, be staying with me for the foreseeable future."

Katrina stared hard. "You have no right to them. I am doing what is honorable, marrying into a noble family."

"You had that with the Klees."

"Are you trying to punish me because I would not marry you?"

"I am not so petty as that."

"Where I am concerned, I am not so sure." She drew a deep breath. "There is more. While Mark and I were in St. Petersburg, we married. There, with my family at my side."

At the news, Peter pushed to his feet and walked to the mantle. He fingered the finial of a delicate silver urn.

"I plan to wed here in London also. You may join us as part of the family or you may sulk."

"Who you marry is not my concern. The wreckage you seem to enjoy strewing in my path, and your sons, is. The children will stay with me."

"That is not what Samuel wanted."

"In your rush to another man's bed, how would you know what Samuel really wanted?"

"The guardianship was only a formality. He meant that I would take responsibility for them and he left me the funds to do so."

"They've had enough Russian learning. It is time they were brought up as proper English lads. You've forfeited any right you have to them or to influence them."

"I want my sons, Peter."

"It's too late. You must now lie in the bed you've made."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come to bed, Katrina."

She tried to hide her worry and sadness across the room, her shoulder braced near the jamb and the heavy curtains acting as a veil at her back. Mark had finished stoking the fire with a few strongly scented rowan logs and now reclined on the bed watching her, knowing the grief she bore.

Only once before in his life had Mark felt more like killing a man. The first had been when Lucian Conover, the Marquess of Dane, had compromised his sister and practically blackmailed her into continuing the potential scandalous and dark affair. Mark was ready to end Dane's life, except the blighter ended up marrying his sister, and she was dotty in love with him now.

And now Peter Klee, who deserved a special spot in hell.

What man would deprive a loving and devoted mother of her children?

When he'd arrived home, he'd found her ensconced in her bedroom, weeping inconsolably. He had no patience for tears, except Katrina's, and he'd tried to comfort her in between bouts of muddled sobbing and angry denunciations of Peter Klee's character. She had not seen her sons since Katrina and Mark had returned from St. Petersburg.

But she had contained herself, though her eyes were red from shed tears.

Katrina turned from the window, strolled toward him, and reached for his open hand. "I cannot sleep. Not tonight."

"I would comfort you with assuring words, but I don't know how guardianships work, more specifically what Lord Klee intended. A man such as Peter Klee can be reasoned with, especially now that you are married to an earl. If not, there is a legal solution, that much I do know."

She sat beside him. "I don't understand his vehemence."

The fresh scent of lilacs and roses engulfed her and tempted him.

"Do you not? Katrina, the man is in love with you. And he is punishing you."

"Using my sons to do so? That is not love."

"Maybe he just needs to think about his actions. Calm himself." He caressed her hand. "Can we give him a few days? The news of our marriage probably shattered the last of his hopes." Mark prayed the man had some honor and would see the pettishness of his ways.

"Why are you so calm about this?"

"They may not be my blood, nor know me as their stepfather, but that doesn't mean I am calm. In fact, I am itching for a confrontation, but not until we have ample weaponry. Our public marriage will be the first step."

"Being the voice of reason is not endearing you to your wife at this moment."

"Not even a little?"

She heaved a sigh. "The worst part is that Samuel never mentioned Peter would be their guardian. And once I knew, I never imagined he would be so difficult. We never talked about it. But we also never planned for Samuel to die so young. Oh, Mark, what if he takes the boys away and I only see them once a year?"

Mark wrapped his arm about her waist and pulled her into the bed beside him. "They were fine while you were in St. Petersburg. They'll be fine over the next few days until I pay Mr. Klee a visit."

"Will he listen to you?"

He tapped her nose. "Of course he will. I know people."

Mark pressed a kiss to her lips. Her response was tepid; he could see she hadn't stopped thinking about her loss. He didn't blame her. He was surprised she wasn't supine in grief. Did her sons even know she was back in London? Had Klee told them?

"I know you can help, but..."

"But?"

"This is my responsibility. They are my sons. If my actions caused me to lose them, then I should be the one to set it right."



"I do not doubt your determination, but there are things better accomplished with subtle force than charming persuasion."

"Hm. Because you're a man?"

"Well, I am a man of my times. And speaking of husbands..."

"We weren't speaking of husbands," she said.

"I found something for you. I didn't have time to wrap it properly." He grabbed the wooden box from the bed stand and handed it to her. The box was square and simply made except for an outline of finely grained decorative ebony and mahogany inlay along the outside edge.

"Can I guess?" She shook the box next to her ear. There was a pleasant rattle.

"It has the Angerstein mark, but I didn't realize they made crafts aside from jewelry. Go on, open it."

He watched her face as she opened the lid.

"Oh my." She smiled, then pressed her fingers to her lips for a moment. "Silver napkin rings. Sixteen of them," she whispered.

They were laid out in four rows of four, the silver shined to a brilliant luster. There were two things she had not noticed yet.

"Look at the engraving," he hinted.

She plucked up one of the rings and held it to the light. "An A."

"The jeweler who found them thought they belonged to your family, not just a trinket they sold."

"That's...that's amazing. Really," she said.

"But look here." He pointed to the silver intaglio with the date and initials. "It looks like it was too old to be your parents, but maybe it belonged to your grandparents."

"Can that be?" She squinted and looked closer. She handed him the box. "Wait, I have an old family history. I think I know where it is." She scurried from the bed and departed the room, her rail billowing behind her. She was only gone a few minutes and returned to the room with the same hurried footsteps. The book was already open, her hand holding it in place. "Look," she said.

She tilted the book so he could read. "It's the same. The initials of my father's parents. I wonder who made them. What if it was my great-grandfather? He would have had to make them while in Russia. Oh, Mark." She tucked the book under her arm and reached for the box again, fingering the fine silverwork. "They are beautiful."

"I'm glad you like them." He took the book and set it aside. Then the box. She looked into his eyes, her gaze misty and loving.

He slid his hand over her hip and along her other curves before she was once again in their bed. He kissed her again, a soft, urgent

touch to which she finally responded. He rucked up her silky nightdress until her legs were exposed. Distress could sometimes be alleviated with a proper shagging. Or so he had heard. And now there was an overflowing well of gratitude and surprise.

He leaned over her, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh. "Do you mind?" he asked. She shifted her leg and opened for him. The aroma of roses and lilacs was replaced by the earthy fragrance of woman.

Katrina had closed her eyes, reposed and peaceful for the moment. If she was thinking of her sons, he planned to make her forget everything, including her name.

After a few more kisses, and aroused by the ticklish touch of soft hair upon her mons, he turned to more serious matters. The roll to change positions was quick. He nestled between her legs, lifting one leg away and opening her completely. She was pliable and accommodating.

He used his tongue, swiping over the small bud of her desire. She moaned.

The tension in her body seemed to vibrate through him. She clutched her thighs about him and lifted her bum. He applied himself, licking and sucking and licking again until Katrina panted and tossed her head back and forth upon the pillow.

She slid her fingers through his hair and cupped the back of his head, holding him in a rather domineering manner.

When he stopped to watch this wanton display, she took a deep breath and bit at her lip. The tendons on her neck stood out; her free hand clawed into the bed covers.

Mark reached for one exposed breast and toyed with her nipple, pulling and lightly twisting. He pressed a sweet kiss to the swollen bud between her thighs, then sucked it into his mouth. He suctioned the sensitive nub at the same time he tugged.

Katrina flew to pieces in the metaphorical sense. She arched, let out a breathy scream and then slowly descended to earth again. She lay there panting.

Mark moved again, working to free his cock. Sliding into her was a bit of heaven, slick and pliant as she was.

She, still in a dreamy state, ran her palms down his chest. "Oh, Mark," she said.

They kissed again, and he encouraged it to go on with touches to her cheeks and eyelids and then a gentle lick around the curl of her ear. And all the while he contained himself with gentle but deep thrusting. From experience, he knew that she might enjoy a second release, and he wanted her to. He wanted her to forget, for a moment

or two.

Heat burst between them. His chest rasped against the soft cushion of her breasts. She hooked one leg around his waist; her nails dug into his back. She sank her teeth into his shoulder and bit down. Hard.

He yelped, then rolled with her.

The gown she wore billowed about them. She braced her hands against his chest while he gripped her thighs. With her head thrown back and her eyes closed, Katrina worked toward her own pleasure, riding him with slow, sensual motion.

Her muscles clenched over his manhood, taking his breath for a moment. The pulses of her pleasure milked him until he was as weak as she was, softening over him and cradled in his arm.

He jerked the covers over them, then pressed a kiss to her temple.

"I love you, Katrina, and I promise, you will have your sons back."

\* \* \* \* \*

Katrina felt an enormous happiness that they had married while they were in St. Petersburg, with her remaining family surrounding her.

Here? The vows were spoken quietly and reverently in front of Mark and his sister's small family, including the marquess. Lucy blinked like an owl throughout, her head swiveling about at every unfamiliar sound. And Katrina marveled that such a man as the marquess held the child throughout, patient with her every squirm and attentive to her dribbles and shy half-words.

Katrina smiled, a forced emotion in her expression.

Peter had taken the boys to Kent for two weeks of hunting, leaving her alone for one of the most important days in her life. Even Mark had not been able to meet with Peter to air his displeasure.

The marquess and marchioness hosted the wedding breakfast and there were another seven couples in attendance, all acquaintances and friends of the Compton family, plus some of Katrina's neighbors. Katrina was seated next to Lucian Conover, the marquess. She had heard of his sullied reputation, but Mark had never spoken a word against the man in her presence. Katrina did not know him at all, other than as the devoted husband of her sister-in-law.

"Thank you, my lord," she said to him as they dined on several aromatic meats, various egg dishes, and hot rolls with fresh butter and honey. The cakes were stacked in the middle of the table and flowers were tucked into the cracks in between. "The breakfast was lovely. I wish to convey our heartfelt thanks for providing such a memorable day for us."

The breakfast had been rather late and the foods were more suitable to a lavish luncheon, including a dozen bottles of wine direct from the marquess's cellar.

"And yet it is incomplete, is it not?"

"Indeed." She sighed, but smiled, trying to alleviate his concern. She didn't know what Mark had told him "It is a bit of mess, caused by my own carelessness," she said.

"Most guardians with whom I am familiar are most negligent in their familial duties. Your brother-in-law seems most intent in his."

"Yes. I am fortunate." He laughed, which caused her to laugh. She pressed her fingers against her lips. "I'm sorry. That was rather acerbic, and on my wedding day. Mark told you?"

Katrina examined the marquess. He was a serious man, she thought.

"Mark tells me very little, but he did mention something to Christina, and that is the same as telling me." He lifted his glass. "To your marriage and the return of your children."

Katrina did the same. The slight tinkle of their touching glasses brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't look at him, instead glancing across the table to see Mark watching her. One side of his mouth quirked up, offering a bit of understanding. Then he raised a questioning brow.

She shook her head. No, there was nothing he could do in the midst of their breakfast celebration.

The marquess had turned away to answer a question from Margaret Bell, and Katrina was surprised to hear, "It turns out our second marriages were the best for us all."

"Oh?" Katrina asked.

Margaret leaned forward, "You see, I was married to Luc's brother many years ago. And Christina is also Luc's second wife."

The marquess tensed but was no less pleasant. "Fate has been good to each of us, in its own way."

"I did not know. My circle of friends and acquaintances is rather small," she offered. Because she was Russian and an outsider, though she had tried the entirety of her marriage to increase the standing of the Klees. She was grateful for Mark and the opportunities he brought to the marriage. Who knew? Maybe they would have a child someday who would be the next earl. Or a daughter, she thought, a little too longingly.

"You must never apologize, Lady Compton," the marquess assured. "Better true and faithful friends than the lure of faux intimates, regardless of their perceived stature."

Mrs. Bell had turned to speak to the Reverend Samuels. Katrina glanced about the room. Aside from the marquess and Mark, there were no other titled families present. Was it by design?

"When will your sons return from their hunting adventure?" Dane asked then.

"On Saturday. At least that is what Peter's note said. Unless they find their hunt bountiful."

"Hm. Mr. Klee enjoys his sport, does he?"

"It's his great hope my sons will be avid sportsmen as well. He might be lucky regarding Ivan and Claud, but Sergei, I'm afraid, is rather studious."

The marquess held a wine glass, swirling it a bit, contemplating some great matter. "And tell me, is Mr. Klee heir to the baronety?"

"Well, he was. You see, a middle brother died a few months after Samuel and I married, so he would have been the baron, should such a circumstance have warranted, but then we had the boys one after another. Of course, Peter is still an heir, but seems unlikely to ever be the baron now."

"It is a rare guardianship that allows a potential heir to be the decision-maker. Your husband must have had complete trust in his brother."

"Oh, yes, he did."

"And you will pardon the impertinence, Lady Compton, is the baronety adequate to your needs?"

"Um, yes, it has been...suitable." Katrina wondered why he asked, but she did not have the sort of character that challenged such personages as a marquess, especially when said marquess was an extended family member. Her hope was that he wasn't implying some inadequacy in the Compton family finances, as Peter had suggested a few weeks ago.

"Are there properties to be maintained?"

"Oh no, we did not have that sort of wealth. My ancestors likely had more assets than we Klees," she said, smiling at the absurd thought, a thought that actually lifted some of her sadness. And then she remembered the beautiful set of silver napkin rings and wondered what it took to gift such a valuable set of seemingly simple kitchenware. The Angersteins must have been very wealthy at one time.

But what did it all really matter? Was anything more important than Mark and her sons? Was being an acclaimed hostess something she should strive for above all? Yes, she wanted a good name, not just for herself but for her children. But she did not want it at the cost of her soul and her honor.

She remembered the first night Mark had approached her. Had she thought about love and kindness and companionship? No, she'd thought about marrying an earl, to her shame.

It had turned out well, but not because she'd deserved it, but because they'd become friends during their sexual trysts. Neither of them had thought about the future, but they had given all, one day at a time.

The marquess had turned away again, this time to accept his daughter from his wife, Christina—Mark's favorite sister, though Katrina was sworn to secrecy. Christina whispered something to the marquess and then addressed Katrina.

"Are you enjoying your wedding day, Lady Compton?" she asked, while rubbing one hand over her bulging belly.

"Most assuredly. I'm especially surprised how right your husband is on certain matters."

"I'm right about a good deal many things, if only I was asked for my opinion more often," Dane offered. "Christina is the queen of our household, you see."

"Don't let him fool you, Lady Compton. He is the master of the house and we his devoted acolytes." Smiling broadly, Christina rested her hand on his shoulder. With his free hand, he gently touched her fingers.

Katrina felt a smidgeon of jealousy and glanced at Mark again to see that he still watched her attentively even though he was talking to Mrs. Balfe, one of Katrina's neighbors and a particular friend.

Mark had traveled all the way to St. Petersburg to declare his love. He did such simple yet Herculean things as find rare family heirlooms for her, when she had none of her own. He loved her, for which she was immeasurably thrilled. It was a strange thing to love one man like Samuel, and only realize later that it wasn't love at all. What she felt for Mark was something new and wonderful and shone so much brighter in comparison to her dutiful first marriage.

She reached for the silver napkin ring that adorned her wedding fichu. It secured the lacy ends and remained tucked at the valley of her bodice. Something old.

Something new was her friendship with the Marquess of Dane. Mark and Luc may not see eye to eye, but Katrina felt she had started a friendship with him that would last a lifetime.

And her dress, both borrowed and blue, matched the morning sky, which on this day was only partly covered by fat, white clouds.

"It is a good day, isn't it," Katrina said.

Lord Dane raised his glass again, and made a toast in Russian, his accent perfect and the words meaningful.

Katrina laughed, a little nostalgic at hearing her language again, and joined in the toast. “Yes, it is a good day to enjoy the wealth of friendship.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Lucian Conover, the Marquess of Dane, retained his reputation as the dark marquess because he found it useful from time to time. Christina laughed at him when he claimed to possess such a wicked character, and then usually took him to bed to prove how wrong he was.

However, such was not the case today.

Since Christina had mentioned Katrina's woes regarding her sons' guardianship, Dane had fumed.

And plotted.

Mark Turnbow was perfectly capable of threatening Peter Klee and probably retrieving his stepsons in the process, if not by fear and force of will than surely through the law.

That would create further bad blood between mother, sons and uncle, which Dane intended to avoid. However, Mark did not know what Dane knew.

Dane had the weapons to destroy the man, and within a few days, he'd armed himself to the teeth for his short, day trip to Surrey.

Once he descended from the carriage, he strolled to the door of the quaint country cottage. Behind the house, somewhere, he could hear the sounds of children screaming and playing.

At least he would not have to believe Klee had abused his charges in any way. Dane accepted that three growing boys would love the time spent in the country riding horses, hunting and hiking. Doubtless Klee had used that to leverage his advantage.

As a wedding gift, he would offer Mark and Katrina the use of Longford for a few months. Mark could become acquainted with the boys through shared activities, such as they seemed to enjoy. Katrina could tut and gasp all she wanted, but the boys would remain under her watchful eye, which was really all she needed.

Once the front door was open and his card presented, Dane was escorted to a cozy sitting room at the back of the rather pleasing house. Through the windows he could see the three boys, running and pushing and throwing some object, led by the young baron. Ivan, he thought. He stood watching them, thinking of his Lucy and the sons he and Christina might have some day.

Hearing Klee's footsteps, Dane turned to face him.

Klee stopped and bowed. The winged brows and the startled gaze reminded Dane that even Klee knew of Dane's dark reputation, as he had hoped.



“Lord Dane, how might I be of assistance?”

Dane slapped his gloves in one hand and stared the man down. “A small matter, really. One we shall put to rights this afternoon.”

“I don’t understand.”

Dane turned toward the window again and watched the boys. “When *Lady Compton*,” he said with emphasis, “returns to your door to collect her sons, you will release them to her without objection.”

Klee chuckled. “I will do no such thing. And what business is it of yours anyway?”

“I didn’t say it was my business,” Dane said, turning toward him. “I said you would release them to her without objection.”

“The guardianship sets out my obligation—”

“You and I both know you have perpetuated a fraud, Mr. Klee. Such a shame, taking advantage of Lady Compton’s lack of knowledge concerning English law. But then, that was the impetus behind your slimy idea, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Be a man, Klee, and acknowledge when you have been caught. You were not named guardian. Perhaps your brother intended to make it legal, but he didn’t. We’ll never know why, nor do we need to know.”

Klee strolled to a sideboard and poured a drink, rudely ignoring Dane in the process. The man was arrogant enough to think Dane had arrived with wet powder.

“My brother made his wishes clear to me. That is enough. Besides, I am the most closely related person and the natural choice for such a duty.”

“Ah, there’s the prick. You are also in line to inherit should something happen to the baron or his brothers.”

“How dare you!”

“Spare me your outrage. The Court of Chancery might view your ill-gotten attempt to influence the baronetcy as solely for your own benefit.”

“The baronetcy was practically insolvent at Samuel’s death.”

“In the strictest sense, but that didn’t include Katrina Angerstein’s—I mean, Lady Compton’s—original marriage contract. I can just imagine how the men in the family haggled over the marriage portion, all while the young, naïve bride had no idea what was being negotiated. And then ever so grateful to receive her monthly pin money.”

Klee turned away and gulped the drink he’d been gripping with white-knuckled fury.

“And if that isn’t enough to convince you and to obtain your full cooperation, *I will ruin you*,” Dane said with soft-spoken vehemence. “I wouldn’t have it said I didn’t give you options, but there you have it. The circle has been drawn. Stay inside, and you will continue to enjoy a familial relationship with your nephews. Step over it, and you will find yourself experiencing the seventh degree of hell. All of these truths will be revealed, plus all of those truths you wish to keep hidden. Those things you do in the dark of night at my old business haunts. I might mention there were young boys involved for the benefit of the gossips. Well, you get the idea. Truth and innuendo are often difficult to separate.”

“You bloody bastard. You’re one to accuse me? Wallowing in your own pool of filth?”

“There’s a difference, Klee. I have never tried to hide what I am.” Dane stared hard.

“You give me little choice.”

“No choice at all, really. But as an added incentive, I will give you four weeks or so to approach Lady Compton with the astonishing news of her tangled inheritance and its miraculous discovery. You might yet end up being Lady Compton’s champion.”

“When should I expect her?”

“I suppose once her new husband allows her to leave the marriage bed, wouldn’t you think?”

“I was only doing what was best for my nephews.”

“That is always the defense when one is doing what is best for oneself.”

“And what am I to tell Katrina of this conversation? I suppose it was she who enlisted your help?”

“My advice would be to pretend this conversation never happened, and you might yet end up with a satisfactory life.”

Dane might be wicked, but he’d never let a debt go unpaid, and he owed Mark Turnbow his entire existence. This little intervention was but one small payment toward that debt.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mark, you don’t have to do this.”

She pivoted at the top of the stairs, trying once again to release her husband from any obligation regarding her sons. Mark’s hand was firmly at her back and he smelled of some indefinable concoction that distracted her from her real purpose. Instead of performing her difficult task, she wanted to pull him into the nearest closet and press her nose against his neck...followed by anything else they might dream up.

"I traveled all the way to St. Petersburg to get you. I can certainly make the trip with you to Surrey."

"But I might fail and then you will have to endure my tears for the return carriage ride. And possibly the rest of our lives together."

"Klee deserves a proper set down, and I'm the man to do it. You know it does help to verbally thrash his character on occasion, yet you haven't said a word against him."

"Need I remind you what our mothers taught us as children? My silence should mean I have nothing good to say."

"Oh, so you do have a few choice phrases you'd like to shout?"

"This conversation is foolish. Come along if you must, but you are not to interfere."

"Upon my word. Unless Klee is unreasonable."

"Which he will be, but I will insist. I can be quite forceful when I need to be."

"Like you were last night?"

She heated. "Mark, we are not alone here."

"*Tch.*" He clicked his tongue. "We are newlyweds and our servants have politely gone deaf and blind for the near future."

Katrina took his hand and gripped hard. "Tell me everything will be all right."

"No matter the outcome, you have sons who love you and always will. You have a husband who adores you." He kissed her brow. "And no matter what it takes, or how long it takes, you will have your sons back."

During the carriage ride, they rode mostly in silence. The heaviness in her chest made breathing difficult, let alone the talking. Mark held her hand, squeezing gently from time to time.

But her heart soared when they arrived at Peter Klee's home and Sergei, who seemed to be out on his own, ran alongside the carriage before it came to a complete stop.

She waved out the carriage window and Sergei yelled, "Mama!"

Once they stopped, Mark jumped from the carriage and reached for her, setting her to her feet just in time for Sergei to come crashing into her. She hugged him, feeling as though he had grown inches and aged years.

"You are home! Uncle Peter said you were. He said you would come soon and here you are!"

"Let me look at you!"

"It's just me! Did you see everything in Russia? Did you meet the tsar? And eat *borscht*?"

"No, I didn't see everything and Tsar Nicolas was too busy to see

me. And I ate *borscht* once a week with a healthy spoonful of *smetana*."

"Did you bring me anything? When did you get back? Uncle Peter said you married."

"He did? Oh, I wanted it to be a surprise."

"I was surprised. Claud was surprised. But Ivan said he knew all along."

"He did, did he? And where are Ivan and Claud?"

Peter walked up then. "They are off riding. They shouldn't be much longer." He leaned to press a kiss to her cheek. "Congratulations, Katrina. Lord Compton."

He bowed, then shook Mark's hand before putting an arm about Sergei's shoulders. "Why don't we go inside and wait? I'll have some refreshments prepared."

"Peter, you know why I am here," Katrina said.

"Come inside anyway." He steered Sergei away, who happily followed. Mark was there to escort her and she was never happier for his support. He hadn't said anything, but he wore a serious frown.

Sergei looked over his shoulder and smiled at her, nearly breaking her heart with his openness. "Is he my father now?"

Katrina couldn't stop staring at her son's face, so familiar and so new. Still so innocent and trusting and loving. But changed. "Yes."

"Keep walking, Sergei. We'll get all the answers in good time," Peter said.

Inside one of his sitting rooms, she took a seat on a couchette and Sergei plopped next to her and leaned against her shoulder. Naturally, she wrapped her arm about him in return, relieved that her little boy had not grown up too much in her absence. Mark stood beside her, a sentinel with only one purpose.

Tea and biscuits appeared along with a few glasses of hearty ale. The cool drink slid down her throat and eased her worry.

Peter wanted to know about the trip from London and the wedding, and then they settled into a discussion of Russia, which he could have asked about when she saw him several days ago. It was all too civil. And not at all what either of them had expected. She'd glanced at Mark once and he lifted a shoulder, evidently as confused as she was about Peter's sociability.

She brushed at crumbs on Sergei's shirtfront. "I'm glad you're home, Mama," he whispered.

"Me too."

A clamor in the hallway caused Katrina to jump to her feet. Ivan burst through the door first. "Mama!"

Claud was right behind him. Suddenly, she had two boys in her arms and tears in her eyes. She kissed them quick, little pecks to their cheeks, nothing that would embarrass them.

After, a flurry of questions ensued, much like Sergei's, until Ivan said. "Are we going home today? Should we pack our trunks?"

Katrina glanced at Peter. They'd had no discussion yet; she hadn't said what she came to say and she couldn't demur now. "Yes. Ivan, why don't you request help from a servant? All of you now. Go on. We don't have all day."

A clumsy stampede ensued, and then quiet again.

"They look happy, Peter. Thank you for caring for them."

He said nothing for a moment, then bit at his lip. "Well, it wasn't the best circumstance, but how can I continue to argue what is best for them when you have obviously improved your situation? And the boys'. Again, congratulations on your marriage. If you will excuse me, I will make sure things are moving along."

He bowed again and closed the door behind him when he left.

Katrina took a deep breath. "What just happened?"

"Either you are the most persuasive woman alive or he's had a change of heart."

"I did nothing. I didn't even ask."

"That is a letdown. I was aching for an old-fashion brawl," Mark said.

She laughed. "And all you get is three stepsons."

"I'm happy for you."

Such a weight had been lifted. She hadn't known she'd felt so burdened by Peter's demands.

"So, what do you think about Dane's offer? A honeymoon at Longford? The boys will not be in the way, I promise." She wagged her brows.

"You are quite a woman, Lady Compton. A marvelous lover. A mistress no man could ever forget."

"I should think not. Wait until you see what I can do as a wife." There was a tussle coming from the staircase. She jerked her head in that direction. "They are going to come barging through the door any moment with some monumental problem that only a mother can solve."

"Then they are going to see me kissing their mother with much abandon."

"Shocking, sir."

"It will teach them to knock before entering."

"Hm, that might be a good lesson. Now, you said something about

a kiss?" She wrapped her arms about his neck; his went around her waist and he lifted her to her toes. He pressed his lips to hers then they joined in an open-mouth kissed that seared every nerve in her body. The noise outside receded; the kiss strengthened in its intensity until they had to pull away to catch their breath.

Mark ran a finger along her lips. "Don't be afraid to share them with me, Katrina. I've always wanted sons."

"I'm not, but I have an idea how we might get you one of your own, if you'll allow me."

"Allow? I will encourage this pursuit with all my heart."

Within the hour, the carriage was loaded with trunks and boys, along with much happy chatter.

Katrina's heart was ready to burst. "I should not be so happy," she whispered to Mark.

"We are a family now. You will never have to choose between us again."

He pressed a quick kiss to her brow. The coachman yelled, cracked the whip and the horses jerked the carriage into motion, toward their new life together.

## Epilogue

Mark and Katrina took the boys to their country estate the following summer. One afternoon, the boys had collected their fishing poles along with a very smelly bucket of something and waited on the front stoop for Mark and Ivan to appear.

The dogs, three staffies, one for each of the boys, ran circles around the group, sensing an upcoming adventure.

“What is it?” Katrina asked Sergei, glancing down at the unknown ingredients. She had worried about Mark’s ability to be a father to her sons, but he had taken to the challenge. The hunting and fishing had won the respect of Ivan and Claud, but Sergei required more intellectual pursuits. They played chess every Sunday afternoon. Mark gave no quarter, and Sergei had glowed the first time he’d beaten his stepfather.

“Bait paste.”

“But what’s in it?”

“Squished worms, fish guts, moldy bread, raw liver, bugs and grasshoppers. And some other stuff,” Sergei finished, straight-faced.

“I think it’s missing something,” she said.

“No, that’s it. That’s what Claud said.”

“I think it needs some spit, too. So, you can roll the paste into balls.”

“Oh, maybe.”

Claud started laughing. “You dolt! It’s just bran and clay mixed together.”

The dogs started baying at the sound of approaching visitors.

A carriage and four came flying up the limestone lane and came to an abrupt stop at the front door, causing the three of them to step back. The conveyance door was emblazoned with the shield of the Marquess of Dane, Mark’s brother-in-law.

Lord Dane was the only one to step from the carriage and without preamble asked, “Is Lord Compton available? I am sorry for the interruption but it is urgent,” he said to Katrina, before pressing a quick kiss to her cheek.

“Yes, he’s in the house. What is it?”

Mark stepped from the door, Ivan tall beside him.

“My lords,” Dane said. Ivan’s chest expanded in pride and he glanced toward Katrina. She winked at him and could only imagine the thrill of being acknowledged by a duke for the first time.

Lord Dane and Mark had an odd but developing friendship. Katrina thought she understood it, but she was not going to attempt an intervention so that they had one big happy family. Christina had told Mark about Dane's visit to Peter Klee some months ago. Dane had handled it beautifully. And now Katrina felt indebted to him. Who better to help than family members, though?

"Dane, what can I do for you?" Mark asked. He had set his hand over Sergei's shoulder and Katrina's heart warmed to see two of her sons draw close to Mark. Claud had picked up a yard cat and was teasing it with a piece of grass.

"Your uncle is still the governor in Barbados?"

"Yes, Henry Warde. Why?" Mark's brows furrowed.

"My cousin Olivia. She was married a year ago and moved to the island. Her husband has return to England without her, claiming she has died."

"I don't mean to be unsympathetic, but people die."

"Her husband is a shite, and I wouldn't believe him if he said the sky was blue."

"Warde is the man to find out what has happened. I'll send a missive this afternoon." They exchanged a few details. Ivan had drawn close to Mark to listen.

"It is all I can ask," Dane said at the end of the conversation.

"Anything to help."

"You understand the urgency? She is family."

Mark nodded then shook Dane's hand.

Katrina watched as Dane jumped in the carriage and, just as quickly as he came, he departed, probably going to Longford, his primary country estate. His wife Christina had delivered a healthy baby boy a few months ago and they had retired from London for some needed peace and quiet.

"Boys, I need to take care of something quick. I'll meet you at the lake." He hurried inside to fulfill his promise to Dane.

Katrina saw the boys off then followed Mark to the library. He sat at the mahogany desk, already busy with the requested letter. She leaned against the door jamb, watching her husband, who she knew to be a man of his word. He'd proven himself to her time and time again.

"Oh, Katrina. May I help you?" He'd glanced up and smiled. "Lord help me if I ever have a daughter to worry about." He sanded the letter, folded it then heated the wax before pressing his seal into it. "I hope Dane's concerns are ill-founded."

"Knowing Dane, I would wager on his instincts."

Katrina strolled into the room and stood next to Mark. She rubbed



her hand across his shoulders.

He leaned back. "Why don't you go fishing with us? We could lounge on a blanket beneath the trees and enjoy the birds singing."

"Sounds romantic but Dr. Jakes will be here this afternoon."

"Oh, is someone ill?"

"Not yet. Are you sure you wouldn't want a daughter? They love their papas in a way that sons never can."

Mark held his breath for a moment. She thought his eyes grew misty. "Are you sure?"

"I'm fairly certain. I just want to talk with Dr. Jakes about my symptoms."

"When?"

"Before Christmastide, I think."

He placed his palm against her stomach. "Are you happy about it?"

She slid into his lap and wrapped her arms about his neck. "Oh yes. I was happy but I'm happier still, thanks to you."

"The Russians don't have some saying about virile husbands and happy wives?"

"Oh yes, they do. It says something about the virile husband providing the fertile wife with new jewels. And lots of them."

"I remember you being a lot less demanding as my mistress."

"You remember wrongly. I was the perfect mistress."

He kissed her quick. "Yes, you were a mistress to remember. And now, the wife of my dreams."

A Mistress To Remember  
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